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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

PERSPECTIVES OF "AT RISK" STUDENTS IN A HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

BY

RAYMOND GEORGE DOWNIE

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL, 1994

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ISBN 0-315-95176-1

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TITLE OF THESIS: PERSPECTIVES OF "AT RISK" STUDENTS IN A HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

DEGREE: DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED: FALL, 1994

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled PERSPECTIVES OF "AT RISK" STUDENTS IN A HIGH SCHOOL SETTING submitted by Raymond George Downie in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Perspectives of "At Risk" Students in a High School Setting examines the school experiences of students identified as being at risk of dropping out of an urban high school. Data were collected from a variety of sources, including school records and field observations; however, repeated interviews of three grade eleven students who participated in the study, provided the primary data.

The findings were initially presented in such a way that the "voices" of the participants would not be lost. Thus, the first level of findings is presented as stories of the experiences of three grade eleven students, one story for each student. Additional levels of analysis have been presented in the remaining chapters.

Findings of this study indicate that attempting to understand early school leavers by isolating single factors of "riskness" fails to come to terms with the complex and individualistic nature of what causes youth to be "at risk." Reductionist approaches fail to provide a complete picture of the process that results in some students leaving school.

Researchers searching for alternative approaches to studies of early school leaving may find the "real time" approach in this study to be interesting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the cooperation of the staff members and students of Gilford High School. Amanda, Karen and Carl deserve special thanks for their willingness to participate in the study and share so much of themselves in the process.

Throughout the completion of this thesis, I was fortunate to have received guidance and encouragement from several individuals. In particular, Dr. W. Maynes, my thesis advisor, provided continuous guidance and direction throughout the various stages of the study. His constant support, thoughtful advice and kindness were greatly appreciated.

I was fortunate, not only to have had Dr. LaRocque as a committee member, but also to have been given the opportunity to work with her in various phases of another research project. This experience was extremely rewarding and provided the opportunity for her to become both a friend and mentor.

Dr. L. S. Beauchamp, Dr. D. A. MacKay and Dr. R. G. McIntosh, the remaining committee members, offered valuable insights and advice throughout the development and completion of the study. Their guidance improved the quality of the research and strengthened the final draft of the thesis.

The comments and questions provided by Dr. R. Donmoyer, the external examiner, stimulated much discussion and

contributed to a challenging and rewarding final oral examination.

Finally, the friends and colleagues I have had the good fortune to meet during the Doctoral program have been a consistent source of support during this intense period of research and reflection.

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CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF THE STUDY

Increased attention has been given in recent years to the number of students who leave school prior to graduation. In Canada this situation has been highlighted in reports such as the Ontario Study of the Relevance of Education, and the Issue of Dropouts. In this report Radwanski (1987) indicated that the Canadian dropout rate averages somewhere between 30% and 33% and rises to approximately 50% for those students who come from disadvantaged environments (pp. 7, 72). The Canadian Council on Social Development (1991) has suggested that approximately 100,000 young people will leave high school this year before graduating (p. 7).

A common thread running through much of the research on dropouts since the 1960s has been the impact of factors whose origins are external to the school on student success or failure (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989, p. 35). Such an orientation towards early school leavers tends to minimize the importance of the school setting and shifts the attention to those factors less amenable to influence by school practices and policies. While a number of the reasons for a student eventually leaving the educational system prior to graduation may be influenced by events outside the school setting, particular school experiences may also have a dramatic impact on a student's decision to leave or to remain in school. These school

experiences are explored in this study.

Statement of the Problem

The general purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of those students who can be identified, on the basis of various indicators, as being at risk of leaving an urban high school prior to graduation. More specifically, the study examined the perceptions that such students have of school, and the meaning that school experiences hold for them.

Research Questions

The research was guided by three primary questions. The first two, **How would students describe their current and recent school experiences?** and **How would these same students describe their school experiences of previous years?** were intended to focus the discussion on specific events, people, and situations the students experienced while attending high school. The final question, **What future schooling might these students take?** was included to encourage the participants to consider and articulate their reasons for attending school. The dialogue resulting from these three questions formed the basis of the interview data.

Significance of the Study

In his discussion of the failures of contemporary theory in educational administration, Foster (1986) noted that there has been a reluctance to deal with issues that are really educational. His advice to those involved in such research is relevant to the study.

> A basic concern for educational administrators should be how schooling contributes to the development of students: what does it do to students and for students? If administration is to be truly "educational," then it must be concerned with educational issues, in particular, who succeeds in school and who does not. (p. 93)

This study investigated the experiences of those students who could be identified on the basis of various indicators as being "at risk" of leaving an urban high school prior to graduation. The basic premise of the study is that students who leave school do not do so spontaneously. Rather, disengagement from the learning environment is a process which occurs over an extended period of time (Statistics Canada, 1990; Sullivan, 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987), and students who are going through this process of disengagement exhibit certain behaviours that are visible in the school setting (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1989).

These behaviours, referred to by Brodinsky and Keough (1989) as "early warning signals," include absenteeism, poor grades, disruptive behaviour, and an inability to identify with one's peer group (pp. 14, 40). Such research (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989; Sullivan, 1987; Wehlage, et al., 1989) suggests that the identification of students before they actually leave may be possible. Consequently, it may be valuable to explore the experiences of these students before they leave the school setting.

The experiences such students have in school and the meanings they attribute to such experiences enhance our

understanding of the process of leaving school and the role, in that process, of the relationship between the student and the school environment. Such understanding could guide future practices in schools and provide direction for development of policies at a more general level.

Terminology

A variety of terms have been used to describe students who leave school or who may leave school before graduation including early school leavers, dropouts, stopouts, pushouts, disengagers, noncompleters and students at-risk. For each of these terms there exists a range of meanings. For example, Radwanski defined a dropout as "any student who leaves school before having obtained his or her Secondary School Graduation Diploma (SSGD)" (1987, p. 67). Good (1973), though, was more specific, noting that the term "dropout"

> most often designates an elementary or secondary school pupil who has been in membership during the regular school term and who withdraws or is dropped from membership for any reason except death or transfer to another school before graduating from secondary school (grade 12) or before completing an equivalent program of studies; such an individual is considered a dropout whether his dropping out occurs before or between regular school terms, whether it occurs before or after he has passed the compulsory school attendance age, and where applicable, whether or not he has completed a minimum required amount of school work. (cited in Morrow, 1987, p. 39)

To exacerbate problems related to terminology, such nomenclature reflects a variety of assumptions regarding, not just such youth, but also schooling: the time schooling should take and when it should occur, the amount of

schooling that is required and what should be learned, the value of schooling to the individual and to society, and the relationship between schooling, learning, and education. Coleman (1993), for example, observed that to employ the term "dropouts" to describe those students who leave school prior to graduation is to suggest "that an active process of choice exists" (p. 332). This term, he noted, should be reserved for those youth who voluntarily disengage from the school setting.

Each of the terms used to describe such students appears to come with its own set of assumptions and range of meanings. Attempting to devise a term that is value free appears to be futile. It is important, however, to recognize the potential effect that terminology has on the development of policies. As Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) observed in their study of disadvantaged youth, "the way in which we define and conceptualize such groups shapes the policies and programs we develop to respond to the problems associated with them" (p. 4).

Research Design and Methodology

Various aspects of this inquiry required the study of school documents such as records of attendance, grades, and in-school behaviours. Possible participants were identified and brief biographies developed from data of this nature. Though, such an approach provided a limited understanding of the school experience of these students. In-depth interviews of the participants, in conjunction with field

observations, added the necessary depth to the proposed inquiry.

The Nature of Naturalistic Inquiry

Certain questions, Erickson, Florio, and Buschman (1980) suggested, such as what is happening in a particular setting according to the members of the setting and what meanings do the members attribute to such happenings, are more appropriately investigated using naturalistic inquiry (cited in Borg & Gall, 1989, pp. 406-407).

Further to this notion of the appropriateness of a particular method of inquiry, Guba and Lincoln (1982) provided five axioms that comprise the underlying assumptions of naturalistic inquiry. How these axioms "fit to the phenomena into which one proposes to inquire" determines the appropriateness of the method (p. 237).

Axiom 1: The nature of reality is viewed as multiple, intangible, and holistic.

Guba (1978) hypothesized that reality is in a state of flux constantly shifting in terms of "time, people, episodes, settings, and circumstances" (p. 15). Reality is manifold in that individuals have separate perceptions of reality and act on these perceived realities.

In this study the researcher attempted to gain an understanding of the constructed realities of particular high school students.

Axiom 2: The relationship between the inquirer and object of the inquiry is viewed as interrelated.

Guba and Lincoln (1982) noted that in naturalistic inquiry the interactions between researcher and the participant may shape the behaviours of both individuals. Such interactivity, they suggested, allows for the researcher to be the "smart instrument, honing in on relevant facts and ideas by virtue of his or her sensitivity, responsiveness, and adaptability" (p. 240).

Two considerations of this axiom had important implications for this study: the beliefs and previous experiences of the researcher and the relationship between the researcher and participant. Attempts to moderate the effect of the beliefs and experiences of the researcher required that the researcher "brackets out the world and presuppositions to identify the data in pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions" (Patton, 1990, p. 408).

Bracketing, as described by Denzin (1989), involves confronting the data on their own terms by temporarily suspending preconceptions and treating all data of equal value. The process of bracketing involves five steps: (a) discovering within the transcripts personal experiences or key phrases that relate specifically to the phenomenon being studied; (b) interpreting the meanings of these statements or phrases as an "informed reader"; (c) acquiring the participant's interpretations of these statements or phrases; (d) searching for the "essential, recurring features of the phenomenon being studied"; and

(e) tentatively defining or describing the phenomenon based on those features discovered in the previous step (cited in Patton, 1990, p. 408).

The ability of a researcher to remain completely objective and take a "neutral nonjudgmental stance toward whatever content may emerge" is, Patton (1990) insisted, "impossible" (p. 40). Member checks, however, enhanced the credibility and dependability of the findings.

A second implication for this study was the possible impact of the relationship between the researcher and those individuals encountered during the study. The researcher needed to consider the particular stance or role that was maintained during visitations to the site and when interviewing participants (Whyte, 1984; Wolcott, 1988). In a school setting this needed to include not only the relationship of the researcher with the particular students who were participants in the study, but also other members of the setting such as other students, school administrators, teachers and support staff (Cusick, 1973).

Axiom 3: The nature of truth is viewed as context-bound.

Generalizations about human behaviour are constrained by differences in time and space. Rather than pursue universal laws "that will be true forever" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 240), the purpose of this study was to describe and interpret the school experiences of the participants in a particular setting during a specific period of time.

Guba (1978) has suggested that the naturalistic inquirer attempt to establish a form of generalizability.

> Often naturalistic inquiry can establish at least the 'limiting cases' relevant to a given situation. But in the spirit of naturalistic inquiry he should regard each possible generalization only as a working hypothesis, to be tested again in the next encounter and again in the encounter after that. (p. 70)

In the final chapters of the study, the discussion of the findings and the conclusions drawn from this analysis led to the advancement of some general hypotheses, rather than universal laws, relating to the process of dropping out of school and the relationship between the student and the school environment. Additionally, the analysis and subsequent conclusions may guide future school practices and policies.

Axiom 4: The attribution and explanation of action is viewed as interactive, nonmanipulative, and plausible.

Naturalists, Guba and Lincoln (1982) argued, view reality as being constructed by, and existing in, the minds of individuals. Causality, therefore, can also be viewed as constructed and can be conceived of as "multiple factors and conditions, all of which interact, with feedback and feedforward, to shape one another" (p. 242). Therefore, that which is being studied can only be understood as a complex system that is comprised of complex interdependencies rather than simple cause-effect relationships (Patton, 1990, p. 40).

Axiom 5: The nature of the inquiry is viewed as value-bound.

Naturalistic inquiry must address the presupposition that inquiry is value-bound. Thus, research is influenced by a number of factors: (a) value systems of the researcher will influence not only what to study, but also how to perform the study and what interpretations can be made of the data; (b) the paradigm that is chosen to guide the investigation; (c) the choice of substantive theory and the methods that have been chosen to collect and analyze data; (d) the value and belief systems that inhere in the context of the inquiry; and (e) the "value fit" or "value resonance" between the inquiry and the nature of the problem (p. 243).

Summary

The epistemological axioms which undergird naturalistic inquiry pertain to the nature of reality, the inquirer-respondent relationship and truth statements, assumptions regarding causal relationships, and the function of values (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 249). This axiomatic system relates to the phenomena being studied in that: (a) the reality experienced by the participants was assumed to be influenced by "values, attitudes, beliefs, and the meanings which persons ascribe to their experiences" (Guba & Lincoln, p. 249); (b) as the researcher interacted with each participant, relationships inevitably developed between them, and while the relationships were beneficial to the conduct of the study, they had to be tracked; (c) the aim of

this inquiry was not to develop generalizations as they are not possible when studying "human behavior, bounded as it is by time and context" (Guba & Lincoln, p. 250); (d) the search for cause-effect relationships is a futile one. Therefore, instead of seeking causal relationships the researcher teased out plausible connections between phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, p. 242); and (e) the nature of this inquiry is, inevitably, value-bound.

Methodology

This study was conducted in a number of stages and utilized various techniques and approaches for data collection and analysis. Interviews provided the primary data, with school documents and personal observations providing complementary data. Initial visitations to the site commenced during the month of September 1992 and the selection of participants occured during October 1992. The collection of data continued for the first semester of the school year.

The Participants

The four students initally selected as participants in this study were enroled in a single school site and identified using relevant school documents. As one of the participants had to withdraw at the early stages of the study, the data collected from three participants formed the basis of this study.

School Records

School-based indicators such as absences and lates,

disruptive behaviour, and course failures or low grades have consistently been identified by various researchers as being correlated to dropping out. The initial identification of possible participants intended to refer to such data. However, only attendance records were made available to the researcher until the participants had agreed to partipate in the study. Therefore initial identification of the participants was based on the limited criteria of lates and absences.

Interviews

Multiple interviews with each participant comprised the primary data. During the study I conducted eight formal interviews with Amanda, seven interviews with Karen, and eight interviews with Carl.

Prior to the initial interview, each participant was informed of the general purpose of the study, and of any matters relating to confidentiality and anonymity. A period of time prior to this first interview was set aside to develop a level of comfort between the participant and interviewer.

The intent of the interviews was to have the participants describe their school and their school experiences. This form of interview, searching for "personal life stories" does not lend itself to ready-made questions (van Manen, 1990, p. 66). Thus, the participants were invited to describe specific experiences based on particular instances, situations, persons, or events (van

Manen, p. 67).

The interviews were guided by three primary questions: (a) can you describe your current school and recent school experiences; (b) what was school like in previous years; and (c) can you describe what you think your future schooling will be like. Subsequent interview questions emerged from the participants' responses to these initial questions and upon analysis of field observations and notes recorded by the researcher. Throughout the interviews there was an orientation towards identifying and explicating what the participants believed to be critical incidents.

Each interview was tape recorded with the participant's approval. A full transcription and an initial analysis of each interview then occured. Another round of interviewing was then undertaken. This process was repeated until no new data appeared to be forthcoming.

Subsequent interviews, aside from discussing recent experiences of the participants, had two purposes: to provide participants with the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcripts of previous interviews and the interpretations and to provide an opportunity to pursue any further questions that may have emerged from an analysis of the interview data.

Student Journals

Participants were asked to regularly record school experiences they regarded as critical incidents or important occurrences as journal entries. These entries were to be

collected by the researcher after each interview and utilized as an additional data source. The participants chose not to engage in such record keeping.

Observation

Patton (1990), in his discussion of the importance of fieldwork in naturalistic inquiry, indicated a number of advantages offered by using observations as a method of data collection: (a) direct observation allows the researcher to better understand the context of the setting (p. 203); (b) firsthand experience enables the researcher to be "open, discovery oriented, and inductive in approach" as the observer "has less need to rely of prior conceptualizations" (pp. 203-204); (c) things that may escape the conscious awareness of participants and staff or are not discussed for other reasons may be observed by the researcher (p. 204); and (d) such observations allow the researcher to "move beyond the selective perceptions of others" and permit the researcher to develop a personal understanding from direct experience. Thus, "the impressions and feelings of the observer become part of the data" (p. 205).

Site selection. The site was a high school located in a major urban centre of Western Canada. A major criterion for the selection of the particular site was access to the various aspects of the school site to allow for the fieldwork proposed for this study.

Site visits. The study was designed to include fieldwork in the high school attended by the participants.

As the intent of these field observations was to better understand the meanings held by the participants, various data suggested by Wilson (1977) were collected. These included: form and content of verbal interactions between participants and with researcher; nonverbal behavior; patterns of action and nonaction; archival records, artifacts, and documents (cited in Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 107).

Resource-related issues also needed to be considered. Constraints of time and a limitation of other resources available to the researcher restricted the duration of the study, yet the researcher needed to remain long enough to observe "a full cycle of activity" (Wolcott, 1988, p. 190). In order to collect data during such a cycle in the school setting this study continued for the first semester of the 1992-93 school year.

During the length of the study observations were made in the classes of two of Amanda's courses, in the classes of two of Carl's courses and in the classes of three of Karen's courses. A total of approximately 100 hours of observations were recorded as field notes during the four months.

Data Analysis

As Borg and Gall (1989) suggested is typical of an "anthropological field study approach," brief field notes were recorded during the observations and expanded as soon after the record had been obtained as was possible (p. 387). The initial analysis of the data or text began as data were

being collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 146). Such considerations of the data were recorded in a field diary.

Bringing order and meaning to the mass of interview data, a process Marshall and Rossman (1989) have considered as a "messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process" (p. 112), was facilitated, to a limited degree, through the utilization of The Ethnographer (Seidel, Kjolseth, & Seymour, 1988), a computer program designed to arrange and manipulate data in ways that can be useful in naturalistic inquiry. WordPerfect 5.1 (1989), a word processing program, also facilitated the organization and managing of data. This form of data management facilitated the analysis of the content of the texts (Carney, 1972).

These programs enabled the researcher to "code, recode and sort data files into analytic categories," though the generation of relevant categories was grounded in the data that were gathered (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 1-4) and thus the meaning held by the participants (Marshall & Rossman, p. 116). The development of these categories, Guba (1978) suggested, was largely a function of "convergence" or "internal homogeneity among items classified in any particular category" and "divergence" or external heterogeneity among categories" (pp. 49, 53).

It was decided that the findings should be presented in a way that would allow the stories of each of the participants to be included. Thus, in keeping with the suggestion by Yin (1989), that each participant can be

viewed as a separate case (p. 31), the findings from this study have been presented in such a manner. A separate section has been written in Chapter III for each of the participants.

Standards of Rigor

The conduct of any study must take into account the underlying principles of the particular approach that is selected. Quantitative approaches must attend to questions of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. To ensure the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiry, Guba and Lincoln (1982) have indicated that the naturalist must attend to "four major traditional criteria" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, pp. 246-247).

Credibility

The extent to which the inquirer's analysis is perceived as accurate by the participants is referred to as credibility. The findings and interpretations of this study are considered credible if the participants and other readers can identify with the themes that emerge from the research. Throughout the collection and analysis of the data, participants were asked to verify the credibility of the themes that were identified by the researcher.

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which, and the conditions under which, readers are able to transfer the findings to their own circumstances and experiences. The participants in the study and their experiences were

described. A limitation with respect to transferability is that issues relating to anonymity and confidentiality have resulted in the descriptions being somewhat more general than desireable in relation to this standard of rigor.

Dependability

Dependability is concerned with whether or not stability exists for the study after discounting certain conscious and unpredictable changes. Would another individual reach the same or similar conclusions and develop similar themes from the data? To enhance the dependability of the findings, the discussion of the themes has incorporated segments of the participants' interviews as well as portions of other relevant data. Also a colleague was sought to review samples of the interviews and other relevant collections of documents to determine if similar conclusions would be reached.

Confirmability

An additional concern is with the degree to which the data can been confirmed from other sources. To protect against a loss of trustworthiness, the particular methodological approach incorporated a number of considerations (Guba and Lincoln, 1982, p. 247). "Within-method" triangulation (Jick, 1979) involved incorporating various data sources in the research design to enable the researcher to acquire information about something from several different sources. Interviews of the participants and field notes were utilized in order to facilitate

confirmability. Member checks involved providing participants with transcripts of the interviews along with the researcher's analysis to determine the extent to which they are confirmed by the participants.

Ethical Considerations

The standards set by the University of Alberta for the protection of human research participants were followed. Participants were informed of the nature of the research. They were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty and without losing the guarantee of anonymity.

Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained at all times. Participants' names were not used, nor was the name of the specific school site included in any printed or published reports.

Written consent of the participants and their parents was required before any interviews transpired. Also, written consent of the appropriate school officials was acquired before any study of related school documents was undertaken.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was designed, conducted and evaluated from June 1992 to September 1992, in an attempt to anticipate any difficulties that may have existed in the data collection or analysis procedures. Field observations, though, were not feasible at this time. The pilot study did not reveal any difficulties existing in the approach to data

collection. Although, it did reaffirm the complex process required to bring order and meaning to the interview data.

Assumptions

The major assumption underlying this study is that dropping out is a process occurring over an extended period of time and students who are going through this process of disengagement exhibit certain behaviours that are visible in the school setting. A related assumption is that the participants were aware of, and were able to express, their feelings about their school experiences.

Delimitations and Limitations

1. The study was delimited to an examination of three students attending one urban high school.
2. The study was delimited to urban high school students and did not consider students from other levels or settings.
3. Data were collected between September 1992 and February 1993.
4. Participation was delimited to students who could be identified, by school records available to the researcher, as having exhibited specific in-school behaviours.
5. The ability and willingness of the participants to recollect and articulate their school experiences and the meaning such experiences may hold for them acted as a limitation.

CHAPTER II

SCHOOL LEAVERS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The intent of this chapter is to set the theoretical context for school leaving. There is an extentive body of literature related to this topic. In this chapter, the aspects of that literature which relate closely to the substance of this study are reviewed. The discussion is organized according to three general themes: (a) difficulties encountered when attempting to determine the number of school leavers and the costs attributed to leaving school prior to completion; (b) changing perspectives regarding those who leave school and why they leave; and (c) relationships between youth and school and the possible effects of the school on leaving school.

Determining the Numbers, Determining the Costs

A subject of recurring concern in North America pertains to high school students who leave school prior to graduation (Hammack, 1987; Morrow, 1987; Tanner, 1991). In recent years, in Canada and elsewhere in the world, this issue has again been receiving considerable attention (Finn, 1989; Levin, 1992). As Levin (1990) noted, however, providing a single answer to the question of how many students currently leave school prior to graduation has not been a simple feat. Two reasons for this difficulty include variations in the terms employed to identify school leavers (Hammack, 1987; Levin, 1990; Morrow, 1987) and

inconsistencies in tracking and measuring students leaving school (Morrow, 1987).

Defining School Leavers

One difficulty faced in coming to a common understanding of who is to be viewed as a school leaver pertains to the many terms used to describe students who leave school before graduation. To further complicate our understanding, each term appears to elicit a variety of interpretations. As Morrow (1987) indicated, several questions need to be answered in order to arrive at a consistent conception of the particular term that is employed. How many consecutive days of school must be missed before one is classified as having not completed high school? Should the variances often permitted in the requirements for graduation for special education students, if achieved, be recognized as the completion of a high school diploma? Should a Grade Equivalency Diploma (GED) be recognized as the completion of high school?

Tracking School Leavers

Solving the problems associated with terminology will not solve all the difficulties associated with tracking school leavers. Even when there is consistency in terminology, counts of school leavers can still vary depending upon the choice of time frame and baseline population (Morrow, 1987, p. 43).

A problem in tracking school leavers relates to whether students are counted during a calender year or over a range

of years. Counting students over a calender year produces an annual rate of school leavers, while calculating the number of school leavers over a number of years through a range of grade levels produces a cohort rate.

A second problem associated with tracking school leavers involves the baseline population that is utilized, or as Morrow notes, the denominator of the equation. The number of students considered for the baseline population can vary dramatically depending on whether one utilizes as the baseline members of the school, that is all those students who are assigned or registered, or attenders, that is those students who attend on a daily basis.

Another variation in the baseline is possible depending whether the baseline population is limited to certain grades, such those in high school, or includes all grades. In either case, Morrow (1987) observed, the results can be misleading (pp. 45-47).

How Many School Leavers Do We Have?

In 1987, Radwanski declared the dropout rate in Ontario to be between 31 and 33 percent. The Radwanski estimate was arrived at utilizing three methods of calculation: (a) the proportion of students in grade nine in Ontario schools who, four years later, obtained a high school diploma; (b) the number of students leaving school between grades nine to twelve without graduating; and (c) the level of education attained by Ontario residents by age 22.

This estimate is similar to the national dropout rate

of 30 to 33 percent estimated by Employment and Immigration Canada (Statistics Canada, 1991, p. 8). This rate was determined by comparing the number of grade nine students to the number of graduating grade twelve students, four years later. This estimate is adjusted for deaths and migration, but not for other factors such as those students who did not graduate from secondary school but entered a different educational institution (Statistics Canada, 1991, pp. 8-9).

More recently, Statistics Canada conducted a study of high school leavers in Canada on behalf of Employment and Immigration Canada. Of the 9,460 youth interviewed for the School Leavers Survey (Statistics Canada, 1991) nearly 24 percent indicated they left school (p. 1). This study of school leavers, completed between April and June 1991, also revealed that, of the students who indicated they had ever left school, approximately 50 percent also reported returning. Of the youth who reported that they had graduated or were attending school at the time of the survey, slightly more than 5 percent indicated they had left school at some time (p. 6).

These numbers differ substantially by province. In Quebec, the province with the highest overall rate of school leaving, the number of school leavers was reported at 27.3 percent; in Ontario the rate was calculated to be 24.7 percent; while in Alberta, the province having the lowest rate, 16.2 percent of the respondents indicated they had left school (1991, p. 7). The male to female rates also

differed, with more males than females in each province indicating they had left school, differences that decreased as one moved from east to west.

Each of the studies to which reference is made above utilized somewhat different approaches to determine the school leaving rates. The School Leavers Survey calculated the number of students who ever left school from one cohort of students, 20 year-olds. The Radwanski study utilized a similar approach, but considered a cohort of 22 year-olds, thus providing two additional years for the completion of high school. The Employment and Immigration figures of 30 to 33 percent, while adjusted for deaths and migration, did not allow for factors such as students leaving high school but attending a trade school. These youth were counted as leavers. The School Leavers Survey, conversely, classified these individuals as continuing students (Statistics Canada, 1991, p. 9).

The School Leavers Survey also had the participants self-identify themselves as continuing in school, having graduated from school, or as having left school prior to graduation. While the Employment and Immigration data included anyone who did not graduate from grade 12 to be a school leaver, some respondents to the survey may have considered themselves as graduates if they received a certificate after completing grade 10 (Statistics Canada, p. 9).

Morrow noted that the improvement of the education of

today's youth requires both a uniform definition of a school leaver and uniform methods of calculating the number of school leavers. He argued that only once this is done will there be hope for progress as it may then "encourage districts to confront the problem" (p. 50).

Even with such uniformity there is no guarantee that the resulting calculation is an accurate reflection of the number of school leavers. There must also be a "quality" criteria in the means of calculation. Addressing issues of uniformity, but ignoring the quality of the definition of school leavers or the method of calculating school leavers, will continue to exasperate those who seek to determine the number of school leavers.

The Impact of Leaving School

Recent interest in school leavers appears to be motivated, at least partially, by the numerous personal and social costs attributed to such actions. The price of school leaving has frequently been reported to include: the loss of economic productivity for the nation and reduced competitiveness in international markets (Economic Council of Canada, 1992), increased antisocial behaviours, a need for greater numbers of social programs, increased levels of unemployment (Cato, 1990; Natriello et al., 1990), lower personal income, and reduced lifetime earnings and quality of life (Rickard, 1990).

The Purpose of Schooling

In modern times there are opposing views about the

> practice of education. There is no general agreement about what the young should learn either in relation to virtue or in relation to the best in life; nor is it clear whether their education ought to be directed more towards the intellect than towards the character of the soul. The problem has been complicated by what we see happening before our eyes, and it is not certain whether training should be directed at things useful in life, or as those conducive to virtue, or at nonessentials. (Aristotle, cited in Grant, 1988, p. 2)

If one is to determine the significance of school leaving, it is necessary to ascertain what is to be learned in school. School systems, are seen by some as social institutions that induct youth into society through training and socialization (Brookover, 1964) and schools are increasingly responsible for developing children into productive and fully functioning adults (Zigler & Ennis 1988, cited in Taylor, 1993)

Others have argued that education can serve to protect and preserve present societal conditions and relationships (Freire, 1968; Illich, 1971). Educational institutions contribute to social mobility and social stratification by endorsing and supporting values and behaviours of portions of the population and sorting people so that some receive the credentials for future rewards. Others, however, "are locked out of participation in the economic life of the country" (Pearl, 1967, p. 316).

Why Some Youth Leave School Prior to Graduation

A major strand of research on school leavers has attempted to identify and understand the background

characteristics of youth who do not complete their schooling (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). These characteristics are then used to identify those students who are most "at risk" or likely to leave school (Levin, 1990).

One set of factors related to "riskness" includes personal problems such as physical and mental health problems, substance abuse, legal problems, trauma and pregnancy. Another set of factors involves the school and include course failure, grade retention, tracking truancy, suspension, and other disciplinary difficulties.

Social and family background factors comprise yet another set of factors related to leaving school (Wehlage et al., 1989). Of these various factors, those associated with family background are strongly associated with school leaving (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987).

Deprived and Disadvantaged

The High School and Beyond report, a longitudinal study of approximately 13,000 high school sophomores between 1980-1982, found that dropouts and remainers differed significantly along a number of dimensions. Leavers compared to remainers were disproportionately from low socioeconomic status (SES) families and ethnic/racial minorities. They were more likely to come from homes "with a weaker educational support system," that is, homes with fewer study aids, fewer homes with both natural parents present, lower levels of education acquired by parents and lower educational expectations for their children.

Additionally, parents were less likely to monitor or be interested in in-school and out-of-school activities of their children (Ekstrom, Coertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1987).

Similar findings were reported by Finn (1989), Radwanski (1987) and Wehlage et al. (1989).

> Virtually all studies correlate low socioeconomic status with higher dropout rates. And because minorities and children from single-parent homes tend to be poor, students with these backgrounds also drop out at a higher rate. Similarly, children from homes in which parents have a low educational attainment or where English is not the primary language are more likely to drop out. (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 25)

Natriello et al. (1990) observed that a prominent view held about early leavers is that they are culturally deprived or socially disadvantaged (p. 4). Such students have been described in much of the research since the 1960's as "aberrant individuals who are deviant, dysfunctional or deficient" (Wehlage, et al., 1989, p. 35).

According to this perspective, Havighurst (1965) noted, certain youth are "disadvantaged for living competently in an urban, industrial, and democratic society . . . handicapped in the task of growing up to lead a competent and satisfying life in American society" (cited in Natriello, et al., 1990, p. 5). Students coming from families living in poverty are perceived as not being versed in the necessary early experiences for life in "mainstream" society. What they may have learned instead, Clark (1983) suggested, in his study of poverty in the United States, is a culture of poverty which conflicts with the values of the

mainstream.

There has been "a bitter controversy," however, as to whether the sources of the poor educational performance of the disadvantaged is the result of family background or the school program (Natriello et al., 1990, p. 7). One critic of both the deficit perspective, or "failure-of-socialization hypothesis," and the difference perspective, or "cultural-discontinuity/failure-of-communication hypothesis," Ogbu (1981), argued that they are inadequate for they fail to consider the effect of broader societal forces on the academic achievement of lower-class and minority students (p. 1).

Educational institutions may represent one of these broader societal forces. Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Fine (1991) have argued that the social inequities experienced by students of economic disadvantage are reproduced and reinforced in the schools. The reinforcement of these inequities may exist when, among other actions by the school, students are allocated to particular curriculum programs (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987) and the differentiation of curricular content and instructional practice through streaming (Radwanski, 1987) or tracking (Oakes, 1985). Oakes (p. 205) argued that such inequities "produce inequities in the daily experiences of students in school and also help create and maintain inequities in the larger society."

Fine (1991) suggested that discrepancies which in the

past have characterized educational access, today characterize educational outcomes. Public attention directed towards these people who "seem to be unable, uninterested, or unmotivated to learn," obscures the "perverse structures, policies, and practices that place them 'at risk'" (p. 26). For such persons restricted social and economic opportunities due to job ceiling and inferior education can result in the development of alternative strategies for survival and this may not include schooling (Ogbu, 1981), or it may limit both the amount of schooling perceived to be of value and "channel" future choices in terms of tertiary education and occupation (Ryrie, 1983; McLaren, 1989).

A Broader View of "At Riskness"

While there is a debate regarding the reasons for youth of low SES leaving school, one certainty is that such individuals disproportionately depart prior to graduation. While youth of low SES appear to be at significantly greater risk of leaving school, many do complete school. Conversely, many youth who would not be viewed as of low SES status do not remain in school. Not all students who leave school prior to graduation come from minority or poor families, or single-parent households. Some of these school leavers come from "well-to-do families" (Levin, 1990).

As Wehlage noted, in the United States "80% of students from single-parents homes do not drop out . . . 66% of all dropouts are white; 42% attended suburban high

schools; 86% had English as their home language; 71% had never repeated a grade" (cited in Persaud & Madak, 1992, p. 248). Similar discrepancies with the "traditional" characteristics of at risk youth in Canada can be found in the School Leavers Survey (1991).

Several authors (Wehlage et al., 1989; Natriello et al., 1990; Levin, 1990) have argued that a much larger percentage of youth should be viewed as being at risk than would be indicated from the background characteristics typically attributed to such youth. Natriello et al. (1990), for example, suggested that educational experiences of youth occur in three "domains," the school, the family and the community. Deficiencies in any of these domains "disadvantage" youth.

> Our definition of educationally disadvantaged allows for variation in the disadvantaged population. Some students will have suffered from a lack of appropriate formal educational experiences, others will have suffered from a lack of intellectual experiences in the family, and still others will have suffered from a lack of educational experiences in the community. These three types of deficiencies may all manifest themselves in the same way on standard measures of academic achievement, but realizing the several possible sources of the deficiencies will sensitize us as we move to identify the size and location of the educationally disadvantaged population. (p. 13)

Arguments in support of a more inclusive view of "riskness" are based on the belief that many youth, not of low SES status, are now experiencing decaying family, social, and economic conditions (Natriello et al., 1990, pp. 10-12). Coleman and Hoffer (1987), for example, regarded

changes in the social context surrounding schools as reducing the "social capital" available to youth and limiting the ability of schools to educate youth (p. 233). As a result of their study of students attending public, private and Catholic high schools, Coleman and Hoffer distinguished between "disadvantaged" and "deficient" family backgrounds. They argued that youth from disadvantaged family backgrounds of low education and low income are now being joined by a rising number of children from families who are deficient in social capital.

These deficiencies in social capital are both structural and functional in nature. Structural deficiencies occur when children have less opportunity to interact with parents due to structural conditions typically involving "single-parent households and working mothers." Functional deficiencies are frequently the result of "increased self-interest of parents, the decreased personal investment in activities of the family as a unit, and the decreased parental involvement with the children" (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987, p. 119).

Such structural and functional deficiencies, regardless of the socioeconomic status of the family, prevent adults from being involved in the lives of youth and result in a loss of social capital. The impact of such a loss, Coleman and Hoffer (1987) argue, "threatens the social, psychological, and cognitive growth of young persons in . . . Western society" (p. 227).

A More Complex Picture of School Leavers

Wehlage et al. (1987), Levin (1990), Natriello (1987), Finn (1989) and Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) are among those who have noted that basing explanations for school leaving on the background characteristics of youth who leave school appears to be too simplistic, ignoring the diversity of those who leave school and the variety of influences leading to departure. Wehlage et al. (1989) observed that while the relationships between these sets of school, home, and personal factors and the ways they interact is not clearly understood, these factors do appear to affect certain students and result in their leaving school (p. 26).

Much of the research on school leavers has attempted to discern the differences between those who leave school and those who remain in school. Labels such as "dropout," employed frequently to describe these school leavers, imply such differences. They imply that "dropouts inhabit a qualitatively different world than non-dropouts." Tanner's (1991) findings, however, suggest that this assumption is imprecise. "The findings from the present research challenge the accuracy of this portrayal of dropouts; in fact, the label itself may conceal fundamental similarities between those adolescents who stay in school and those who do not" (p. 125).

Wehlage et al. (1989), in their research of students in school settings, also observed some similarities existing

for all students. While there is a diverse set of influences that affect, differentially, students' decisions to leave school, all adolescents appear to have common needs which include the need "to acquire a personal sense of competence and success, to develop a sense of identity and social integration, and to acquire the socially useful knowledge and skills that make an individual a good worker, parent and citizen" (p. 27). For most youth, both those who leave school and those who remain, education is seen as the means of achieving these aspirations (Tanner, 1991).

A concern raised by Natriello et al. (1990) is that viewing at risk students as having a "differential susceptibility to environmental conditions" of the school and labelling such students as being at risk tends to ignore the problems presented by the school (pp. 9-10). As a result, adjustment and transformation focuses on the particular students and their values, beliefs, and behaviours.

Wehlage and Rutter (1987) were more critical of such studies. They suggested that the effect of research that focuses on family, social, and personal characteristics, those "relatively fixed attributes of students," may be to provide schools with an excuse when their proposed solutions are ineffective. Researchers, they suggested, must now shift the focus of their inquiry.

> Researchers need now to ask why these youth are educationally at risk and, further, what policies and practices of public schools can be

> constructive in reducing the chances that these students will drop out. It is important to conceive this new research in a way that looks for the cause of dropping out not only in the characteristics of the dropout, but also in relation to those institutional characteristics that affect the marginal student in a negative manner. (Wehlage and Rutter, 1987, p. 73)

Youth and School

When school leavers were asked why they left school, school-based reasons were most frequently offered (Radwanski, 1987; Tanner, 1991). The Radwanski study found that 43 percent of the Ontario dropouts attributed their decision to leave school primarily to school-related reasons. Economic and personal reasons accounted for 27 and 23 percent of the sample (p. 86).

Similarly, the Tanner (1991) study revealed that 61 percent of the males and 58 percent of the females cited school-based reasons as providing the most important motivation for leaving school. The next most frequent reason given by males involved job/money (19%) and for females, it involved family/friends (27%). Tanner also noted that some respondents offered no clear reason for leaving school, while others gave many reasons for leaving (1991, p. 114).

Of the school-related reasons provided by these youth, boredom was cited frequently in all three studies (Radwanski, 1987; Statistics Canada, 1991; Tanner, 1991). Other less frequently reported school-related reasons included problems with school work and particular subjects;

general dislike and lack of interest, absenteeism, truancy, and difficulties with teachers.

While the data provide an indication of the reasons youth had for leaving school, they do little to enhance our understanding of the process of leaving and the role, in that process, of the relationship between the student and the school. Finn (1989) argued that a student's decision to leave school is the culmination of events occurring over an extended period of time. This process of leaving school is described by Finn according to a "participation-identification model."

Participation and Identification

According to the participation-identification model, if students are actively participating in school and in the classroom, which according to Finn (1989) includes a progression from involvement in class related activities to extracurricular activities and school governance, and they experience successful outcomes from this participation, they are more likely to identify with the school. This sense of "belonging" to the school, "valuing success in school-related goals" and, thus, identifying with the school, makes it less likely that students will skip classes, engage in delinquent behaviours, and eventually leave school (Finn, 1989, p. 123).

Finn noted that this model, unlike other models of school leaving such as the "classical" frustration-self-esteem model which links unsuccessful school outcomes to

reduced self-esteem and then to problem behaviour and finally to leaving school, is presented in positive terms. If it were formulated as a cycle of negative experiences it would appear that, as students withdraw from school activities and thus realize less success at school, they slowly begin to identify less with school and withdraw emotionally, and eventually physically, from it (p. 134).

School Membership

Wehlage et al. (1989) discovered that students feeling that they no longer identified with the schools they attended represented a common theme in statements by early leavers. Such students, observed Tidwell (1988), nearly always experienced alienation from their schools.

In their interviews with students Wehlage et al. (1989) discovered that, frequently, students who were at risk of leaving school expressed an unsatisfied need for membership in school. These students "want to belong and to be accepted as part of a peer group" (p. 114). They noted that these students also wanted "the support and approval of adults" (p. 114).

This concept of school membership or identification with the school has been defined by Wehlage et al. (1989) in terms of "social bonding" (p. 117). They suggested that this connection to the school exists as a social bond to the extent that "he or she is involved in school activities and has belief in the legitimacy and efficacy of the institution" (p. 117). For students who leave school,

however, this bond has been weakened by messages of failure and rejection:

> They have experienced a series of failures and received a host of messages from adults and peers that they are not worthy. The inevitable consequence is disengagement and alienation from school. In the face of an institution that communicates failure, inadequacy and rejection, the bonds of trust and affection that sustain people in social settings for common purpose are broken or diminished. The institution itself loses legitimacy in the eyes of these students. Engagement in the work of being a student is rejected because to try and fail again is further confirmation of one's inadequacies. (p. 25)

The importance of this relationship between the individual and the organization was apparent in alternative high schools. Wehlage et al. (1989) found that, in order for students to develop a sense of competence, programs needed "to be matched to student needs and problems" and strategies needed to "take advantage of student interests and strengths (p. 224). Further, they noted that where a sense of belonging to the school was promoted and a supportive school culture was created, the experience of discouragement, failure, and finally withdrawal was reduced (pp. 112-113).

Cohen (1970) indicated that one solution for individuals who encounter such difficulties fitting into an organization is "to gravitate toward one another and jointly to establish new norms, new criteria of status which define as meritorious the characteristics they do possess, the kinds of conduct of which they are capable" (p. 104). Memberships are sought in alternative groups or subcultures.

Cultural subsystems, possessing their own norms, values and symbols, noted Arnold (1970), coexist, with varying degrees of fit, along with the dominant culture of the society, or the "great culture" (p. 82). As not everyone shares the same set of values, beliefs, or norms, the fit between the people and the organization is not always equally successful. In some instances this lack of fit between subgroups within the school and the dominant culture of the school may limit the degree of "social integration" (Tidwell, 1988) resulting in the youth leaving the school or being encouraged or requested to leave.

Participation, Identification and School Size

Historically, larger school size has been viewed as a means of achieving "cost-effectiveness" and "educational efficiency" (Howley, 1989). Yet, large high schools are difficult institutions for individuals to commit to and identify with (Gregory & Smith, 1987). Others have suggested that students attending larger schools will experience alienation and a lack of interpersonal involvement and caring (Stockard & Mayberry, 1985, p. 41).

In larger schools it is likely that anonymity increases and both the frequency and the quality of the relations among students and between educators and students decrease (Wehlage et al., 1989). After comparing various schools, Goodlad (1984) noted that "the characteristic 'large' appears to be consistently descriptive of the less satisfying schools and consistently not descriptive of the

more satisfying schools" (p. 251).

A study of school settings by Gump (1980), building on previous research on the effect of big and small schools on human behaviour by Barker and Gump (1964) and Barker's (1968) work in ecological psychology considering human behaviour in organizational settings, provides an indication of the potential impact of the size of the school setting on the social setting of the institution. Gump noted that according to the theory of "undermanning," "small school students experience more invitations and pressures to participate in settings, take more responsible positions in the settings, and report satisfactions commensurate with their more central setting positions" (p. 561). Gump also noted that data reported by Willems (1967) indicated that marginal students felt more responsible to the setting in smaller, rather than larger, schools (p. 561).

Summary

Concern about students who leave school before completion of what is perceived to be necessary educational requirements for life in society is not new. However, in recent years this interest has resulted in various attempts to determine the number of students who leave school prior to completion and the cost of such actions, both to the individual and to society. Further, perspectives on how we view students who leave school, what we attribute their action to, and what is considered to be minimum requirements have changed considerably.

As more information is acquired about students who have left school before graduation, it becomes clear that youth possessing a wide variety of characteristics and academic records do leave school. Youth of low SES continue to be at greatest risk of leaving school prior to graduation. In 1986, 7.5% of youth, aged 16 and 17 years, of non-poor families; 14.9% similarly aged youth of working poor families; and 16.6% of youth of other poor families dropped out of school (Ross & Shillington, 1989, p. 50). Yet many other youth from very different backgrounds also leave school. While school leavers apppear as a heterogeneous group, a common link to many such students seems to be their relationship to the school.

CHAPTER III

THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES

In this chapter the first level of findings of this study are presented as stories of the experiences of three grade eleven students from Gilford High School: Amanda, Karen, and Carl. In Chapter IV, the meanings imbedded in the stories are explored further.

Initially four students had agreed to participate in the study; however, one of these students, Richard, had to withdraw from participating in the series of interviews. I approached Richard, the first of the students I hoped would participate in the study, on October 28, 1992. On that day we discussed briefly the nature of the study. We met again on November 3, 1992, at a neighbourhood restaurant where we again talked about the study and his recent school experiences. This was to be my first and final interview with Richard, for when I met with him to arrange our next interview he informed me that he no longer had the time to meet with me.

Richard explained that his father had recently moved out of the home, leaving his mother with him and a two year old brother to care for. She was attempting to maintain two jobs, one during the day assisting at a neighbouring school and the other job during the evenings at a laundry facility.

I contacted a second student, Karen, on November 28 and requested that she consider being a participant in the

study. During the remaining three months of the semester we engaged in seven interviews. The interviews were conducted on November 3, November 12, November 18, December 4, December 17, January 11, and January 19.

On November 3, 1992 I contacted Amanda about participating in the study. Between November and January we conducted eight interviews: November 6, November 11, November 18, December 3, December 10, December 17, January 7, and January 21.

On November 6, I approached Carl and asked that he consider participating in the study. Subsequently, I interviewed Carl on eight occasions over a three month period: November 10, November 18, November 25, December 3, December 16, January 8, January 14, and January 22.

The citation system used when referring to the interview transcripts, identifies the particular participant who was interviewed, the specific interview, and the page and line numbers that contain the reference.

AMANDA

When the study at Gilford High School commenced, Amanda was 18 years of age. While she was born in the Maritimes, Amanda moved away from eastern Canada and her father when she was two years of age. Amanda, her mother, and her two older siblings initially settled in Kildare, a city approximately 200 kilometres from Baldwin, a major urban centre in western Canada. Two years later Amanda's mother remarried and the family moved to Baldwin.

Although Amanda's mother and stepfather have since divorced, she has maintained close relations with both. As this study drew to a close Amanda, who since grade ten has not resided with her mother, now lives alone in a downtown apartment near the auto dealership where she works.

Becoming a Participant in the Study

My first conversation with Amanda occurred on October 23, 1992, during my first visit to an English class at Gilford High School. In the beginning minutes of the class, the teacher announced that they had a visitor. Following this identification a number of the students inquired about my presence in the school. Not wanting to disrupt the class any further, I stated only that I was doing research in the school. This brief explanation appeared to satisfy most, but not all, of the students in the class.

One student stated she knew students were interesting, but she wanted to know why I was interested in them. I said I was a university student studying the experiences of grade eleven students. The explanation appeared to satisfy this student and it also provided me with the opportunity to introduce myself and the study to the students in the class. The following day, during the next visit to the classroom, I received the class list and seating plan. It was then that I learned that the person asking the questions was Amanda.

During the next week I attended Amanda's English and Social Studies classes. It was not until my second week of observation in Amanda's classes that I approached her with

my request that she participate in the study. On November 3, as the students were being dismissed from English class I asked her if she would be willing to be involved in the study. I briefly explained the nature of the research and, after her initial agreement, arranged to meet her off-site to provide her with additional details of the study.

Three days later, on November 6, 1992, Amanda and I drove from Gilford to a neighbourhood restaurant. This restaurant, Amanda revealed, was occasionally frequented by students during lunch hour, but typically not after the school day had ended. As we had arrived at the restaurant after the last class, we felt that there would be little chance we would be observed by anyone from the school and thus compromise the anonymity of the participant.

During this first meeting, we discussed the details of the study, including its purpose, the nature of her involvement in the study, and matters relating to confidentiality and anonymity. After reviewing the particulars of the study, Amanda, who expressed an interest in being involved in the study, was given an "informed consent" form. Even though she was 18 years of age I requested she also acquire her parent's permission and signature.

During the next three months I was to conduct seven more interviews with Amanda. We also had several additional conversations after the interviews had been completed. Notes containing my recollections of the exchange were made

immediately after each of these conversations and the interviews. During the study Amanda left school and acquired full time employment. Therefore, the interviews reflect both her school and work experiences, as well as the transition between school and work.

Coming to High School

Amanda attended three schools before completing elementary school. In her fourth year she was diagnosed as having reading difficulties and was provided with additional assistance. Eventually Amanda was enroled in a school able to provide a program designed for special needs students. After attending this school Amanda transferred to high school where she was enroled in "regular" grade ten courses.

A Difficult Journey

Amanda frequently missed school during the primary grades and she continued to do so throughout her later years of schooling. During elementary school she was allowed to miss days, Amanda explained, because her mother finally acquiesced to her pleas to remain at home.

> My mom was really easy and my dad was really strict. And if I wanted to play hookie for the day because I hated school so much, I used to cry when I had to go to school. I hated school. It made me so sad. I didn't like it so I used to cry and tell my mom that I didn't want to go. I didn't want to go. So she'd finally give in because she loved me so much and she knew how much I hated it. So she wouldn't make me go. As I got older it was the same way. Some days I just didn't want to face it. (Amanda 2, p. 4, 189-203)

During a later interview, Amanda provided additional details about her school absences.

> A lot of times I would just come home sick or call my mom and tell her that I want to come home sick. I didn't go to a lot of school. I missed a lot. . . . It was such an awful place to be. (Amanda 8, p. 2, 66-72)

It became apparent from Amanda's emotional descriptions of her early school experiences that she still felt a great deal of pain remembering these events. In each of the eight interviews over three months Amanda continued to provide details of the reasons for being absent from school. From these discussions emerged a story of a person who had become gradually frustrated with school work and began to dread attending.

> Well, it all started in grade one. I don't think I disliked school at the beginning, but I went through school and I remembered one thing. I need help. I need help to learn how to read this. Help me! My grade one teacher was the kind of teacher that gave me the assignment and said do it. I couldn't do it. She failed me. I didn't get the extra help. There was a new school opening, and my mom sent me there. I felt so bad because I failed. I don't think that you can tell a young child that they failed. I don't think it's good. (Amanda 2, pp. 8-9, 440-455)

Her experiences in grade one, culminating with failing the grade, were recounted on numerous occasions throughout the several months we discussed her school experiences. Amanda noted that the difficulties she faced in grade one continued for several more years undetected. Amanda recounted emotionally what she perceived to be at the root of her school problems.

> It's just because my reading is so bad and I don't know why. I can read better than I can spell. I can't spell very well at all, but I can read a lot better than I can spell. I've gotten better by

> reading and stuff. I never used to read at all. (Amanda 2, p. 5, 270-277)

As her frustration with the expectations her teachers had of her intensified and her fear of failure grew, Amanda chose various approaches to avoid situations where she could fail. Not attending school was one such approach, but by simply not doing assignments, she also avoided providing any evidence that she could not complete them.

> I just didn't do anything unless I knew it was exactly perfect. The same today, I'm getting better, but most of the time if I know the word is wrong, I won't write it down. I just won't because I don't want to have it wrong. So I just never wrote anything down that I felt wasn't perfect. (Amanda 2, p. 9, 455-464)

"If I didn't know the answer," Amanda explained, "I wouldn't write it down. If I didn't know how to spell something, I would not write it down. . . . I figured if I didn't write down all the bad stuff how would they know" (Amanda 8, p. 12, 608-647). Amanda noted that she still employs this strategy and avoids responding if she is uncertain of the accuracy of her answer.

In grade three Amanda found that choosing to not do the assignment was no longer being accepted by the teacher.

> Then when I got to grade three, I got an older teacher, she was probably in her 60's, and she just thought I was being a snot, she's a bad kid, I wouldn't do what she told me to do. She was getting really upset one day, so I left school that day and I went home, I didn't tell anyone. (Amanda 2, p. 9, 464-472)

According to Amanda soon after that day her difficulties were diagnosed by specialists. She transferred

to another school and began to receive additional assistance. Although, she notes, by now she did not like school very much and so she continued to miss classes.

> And then they tested me. One guy came in and he tested me and he just told the teacher that it wasn't my problem. It was her problem he said. Then I got help. I went to a different school with people that could help, that was and . . . was there and she was a Special Ed teacher and she helped kids, and that helped. They taught a lot of things, but I still missed a lot of school because I didn't like it very much. (Amanda 2, p. 9, 481-493)

Amanda noted that these evaluations continued throughout her years at school. "They test me all the time. They tested me last year, but I don't know what they tested me for. I've been tested to death" (Amanda 2, p. 18, 949-952).

School and the Home

Arrangements had been made for Amanda to be provided with additional assistance in the classroom. While this attention to Amanda and her education was now occurring in the school, she did not receive similar attention by members of her family.

> My mom is kind of a workaholic, she sells real estate. . . . She works during the day, she shows houses at night and on the weekend. You have to do it when the customer can see them . . . . So she works a lot. (Amanda 2, p. 22, 1184-1194)

While Amanda's father was at home more often, he too did not seem to have much more time for Amanda. Like her mother, her father's career appeared to severely limit the interaction between child and parent. "My dad, when he

prepares for court he brings home briefcases that are this wide and he reads a couple of them and it's a lot of work" (Amanda 2, p. 13, 678-682). As a result of this work her father would spend much of his time at home secluded in his office. "My dad really kept to himself," Amanda noted (Amanda 8, p. 3, 155-156).

When Amanda's parents did attempt to provide assistance with her homework, Amanda became more confused and frustrated than before she had asked for help.

> My dad, he'd make things so confusing. . . . He understands it in his mind, but he doesn't know how to show it to me. . . . Mom wouldn't grasp what I'm even learning. It's like she has to go over it a million times before she figures it out and by then it's like 1:00 in the morning. So no one could help except for the teachers. (Amanda 8, p. 4, 178-185)

During the final interview, Amanda reflected on the level of support she received from her parents. Amanda indicated that she felt ignored much of the time because of their professional obligations. For the first few years Amanda attended school she would go to a neighbour for her lunch. By the time she was in grade three Amanda was responsible for making her own lunch at home alone. At the end of the school day, when Amanda returned home, her mother would already be at work or she would soon be leaving home to show a house to clients. When her father returned home, he went to his office which usually meant that Amanda was left on her own. Children, Amanda contended, need the support of their parents, support she felt she did not

receive.

> I think it's very important especially at young ages, like all the way through their elementary because they need that person to be home at lunch to feed them. They need the person to be home after school to say "how was school" and to read to them and get their children to read . . . . They [children] make it, but I think kids are a lot stronger if they have that support, especially in through their elementary because they need it. (Amanda 8, pp. 2-3, 82-131)

High School: An Uncertain Beginning

In grade nine, Amanda was enroled in a program specially designed for students who experienced various learning difficulties. Attending this program finally gave Amanda the opportunity to develop a positive relationship with a teacher and to experience success at school, but as the year progressed she was beginning to feel estranged from the other students in the class. She was older than the other students in the class and many of her friends were enroling in high school for grade 10.

> I went through three grades in grade nine. I learned a lot. Only English and I think we did Social in his class too, but we never did Science or Math. We didn't have enough time. He wanted me to stay back another year. Everyone's going to high school. I should already be there. I wanted to go. I didn't want to stay. (Amanda 2, p. 11, 568-579)

The decision was made to send Amanda to high school, but she found this transition to the high school to be distressing. One year in a program designed for special needs students did not adequately prepare Amanda for the grade ten courses and the reading and assignments she was now expected to complete. She was not ready for the

difficulties, frustrations, and failures she was beginning to experience.

> I felt bad to ask [for assistance] because everyone else knew what they were doing. All these classes that I was in were so easy for everyone else. Math 14 and Science 14, people were breezing through it. I'm thinking why aren't these people in Science [advanced] or Math [advanced] or something if it's so easy for them? I'm sitting here going, this is so hard, but it's the easiest class, "don't you have an easier one?" And they don't. That's as easy as it gets and it was really hard. I think that has something to do with my background, going back to elementary and missing so much time. (Amanda 2, p. 3, 143-159)

During the next two years, Amanda attempted to complete grade ten at J. B. Woods High School, a school noted for its academic programs. Each year Amanda would begin grade ten, but in each case she would quit before completing the semester. Finally, after two unsuccessful years at this high school, Amanda transferred to Gilford High School where she hoped her fortunes would change and she would be able to complete grade ten.

A Transfer to Gilford High School

Last year was Amanda's first year as a student at Gilford and her third attempt at passing grade ten. During this first year at Gilford she would miss many classes, sometimes to create opportunities to socialize with other students, but primarily because of her fear of school.

> I missed a lot of days. I get sick easy. School makes me feel sick. I get rashes right here on the side of my arm if I have a test. You can see all right here, are all bumps and red, and it's because I get nervous. I get scared. School makes me feel really sick. It makes me feel sick and gives me headaches. (Amanda 2, p. 15, 799-811)

Last year Amanda missed classes frequently--missing approximately 30 classes by the first reporting period (November 1, 1991). In spite of these many absences she was not removed from these classes, though the attendance policy required "termination" in such circumstances.

> Last year at Gilford I applied for 40 credits, I got 35. I failed one course. That's pretty good. . . . I was so used to skipping, I used to be absent. I was so used to having lots of friends and skipping together. You know, let's skip, let's go do this, let's go to the mall, let's go for coffee. (Amanda 2, p. 15, 780-794)

The attendance policy of Gilford specifies that once a student has acquired ten unexcused absences the "termination process" will be initiated (Gilford High School Student Handbook, p. 7). Once terminated from the class no grade is issued and the course, if required, must be repeated.

Amanda attributed being allowed to remain in her grade ten courses to the caring nature of the teachers. They "stuck their necks out last year even though they could kick me out because of my absences, after 10 absences they could say 'see ya'" (Amanda 2, pp. 15-16, 821-827). On several occasions Amanda referred to the teachers who "bent the rules" for her. She explained that she felt this was a sign that they liked her and wanted her to succeed.

The Fall Semester of Grade Eleven

This was Amanda's second year at Gilford. She had returned, hoping to repeat the academic success she had realized the previous year in grade ten. However, during this year Amanda had again been frequently absent from her

classes. The October 13th attendance records indicated that between August 31 and October 9 Amanda had accumulated 31 absences.

At the time of the first interview Amanda was enroled in grade eleven Social Studies, English, Mathematics, and a class designed to provide her with remedial instruction. She was also required to audit an additional Social Studies class to assist her with the Social Studies course for which she would be graded.

Completing High School

Amanda seemed determined to graduate after one more year of schooling, noting that she wanted to acquire her grade twelve diploma before her twentieth birthday. She was concerned, though, that these plans for a 1994 graduation may be thwarted if she did not pass Social Studies now.

> I pray to God that I pass because if I don't, that means I have to change around my timetable, take Social next semester, take [grade twelve Social Studies] next year. I'm 18 now. If I go to school next year, I'll be 19. If I don't finish next year, I have to pay the next year after that. And I'm not going to go back when I'm 20 years old. Nineteen is pushing it. . . . I was supposed to graduate when I was 17. Now I'm going to graduate when I'm 19. I have it planned out just perfect right now. . . . Even though it's really hard for me, I'm working something out. (Amanda 2, p. 26, 1393-1415)

Amanda wished to complete high school before she turned 20. Her reluctance to be attending high school at age 20 was partially motivated by her belief that the school district would charge her a registration fee for attending school. This plan to complete high school next year,

though, appeared to be primarily motivated, not by the financial cost she would incur, but by her belief that she would no longer fit into the high school setting, a fit Amanda would later indicate as already being tenuous.

Amanda was not the only family member to experience difficulties in high school. Her older brother and sister had also experienced problems. During the second interview, Amanda explained that she had witnessed the difficulties her siblings encountered when they left school before acquiring their grade twelve diplomas.

> My sister and brother never got theirs [grade twelve diploma]. I want mine because I don't want to have to go back later which I know is hard to do. My brother tried to go back. My sister tried to go back to [vocational college]. She wanted to be a lawyer. She never did it, but she tried. (Amanda 2, p. 13, 694-701)

Future Plans

Amanda was determined to acquire, unlike her older brother and sister, a grade twelve diploma, a document frequently referred to by Amanda and the other participants in the study as the key to a happier and wealthier future. Even though Amanda was uncertain of the career she eventually wished to pursue, she did know that she wanted to graduate.

> I know the way things are working now-a-days, if you don't have your high school diploma, you have absolutely nothing. You can work at McDonalds and pretty soon people at McDonalds will have their high school diploma. . . . There are cases where people never graduate from high school and they're millionaires and that's great for them, but I think the numbers say that you need your high school diploma and actually you need university or

> something else too to get any kind of real job that pays. But as long as I can get my high school diploma, then maybe later if I decide I want to learn more or maybe I feel smart enough to maybe go to university or [technical college] or something, and maybe later on I will do that. I don't know, but I want my high school diploma now, not later. (Amanda 2, pp. 13-14, 702-726)

The Day-to-Day Experiences in the High School

Amanda's initial description of classroom life was that "you go in there and you just sit there" (Amanda 3, p. 21, 1138-1139). Amanda explained that some teachers like to preach. "Ms. Edwards, she'll take your opinion, but she likes to stand there and talk. So you just sit there and listen" (Amanda 3, p. 21, 1140-1143).

Amanda indicated that during such occasions she would attempt to appear to be attending to the teacher.

> I usually sit there and I stare at her, so if she turns my way, I'm actually paying attention. . . . But I think you have to concentrate. Like one time you'll be staring at her and you'll kind of go off.

Amanda continued by providing additional details of this attending behaviour.

> Well, you think about something else, like I've got to go home and feed my dog and I got to do this then do that, so you're thinking about something else but you're trying to pay attention to her, so you kind of have to think well, stare at her, listen to what she's saying, it's important. Even if it's not, you're supposed to be listening. (Amanda 3, pp. 21-22, 1148-1187)

It was important, Amanda explained, to appear that you were paying attention.

> When I went to class, I knew what kind of a teacher she was, I can tell right away. She's the kind of teacher that likes a student that pays

> attention and I just sit there and stare at her. I wasn't really listening to what she had to say. (Amanda 7, pp. 6-7, 326-333)

Amanda initially described her usual in-class behaviour as sitting in her desk for the duration of the class, attempting to satisfy what she perceived to be the expectations of the teacher, that is, appearing to be attending to the teacher or working on the assigned task. While Amanda did exhibit such behaviours, they were frequently disrupted with a variety of social exchanges.

What typically occurred in these classes, Amanda observed, was that the students usually talk to friends. When I asked her when they would find such opportunities she described the various openings that existed for the students.

> Before she's prepared to start the class or if someone knocks on the door, she has to go answer it, or if the phone rings, or sometimes the students will put up their hand and they'll have a comment and she'll start talking to him about it, so you're not really listening like you're supposed to be while they're talking. . . . So, you kind of turn over and say "what did you do this weekend?" and you start talking. (Amanda 3, pp. 22-23, 1190-1216)

From my observations of the classes attended by the participants it appeared that lessons were usually designed with the intent that students would remain seated for the duration of the class, engaging in various activities of the class without interacting with other students. Students were expected to be attending to what was being provided by the teachers or performing tasks at their desks. For the students I interviewed, what "actually" occurred in these

classes, however, was quite different from such expectations.

From my observations it appeared that most students were engaged in a number of activities throughout the duration of the class, with no single activity being maintained for long periods of time. At any specific moment some students could be observed apparently attending to what the teacher was saying, others appeared to be working on an assignment or reading a handout, textbook or something of personal interest. Some of the students were seemingly asleep with their heads cradled in their arms on the desktops or staring blankly at various spots in the room. A few students would be writing messages to others. In one course two students would typically share the headphones from a "Walkman" and listen to music. For most of these students these behaviours were frequently halted, at least temporarily, by exchanges with other students in the class (fieldnotes-October 23, 1992; November 9, 1992; November 16, 1992).

The students would make the most of the occasions when the teacher's attention was occupied with other matters. Students entering the class late, persons knocking on the classroom door, students seeking personal attention of the teacher, and information requested by the office through the intercom system would all distract the teacher. During these circumstances, the level of student socializing suddenly increased (fieldnotes-November 16, 1992).

As long as the teacher was occupied with other matters such socializing took priority for a majority of the students. When the teacher was again in a position to observe the class as a whole the students quickly displayed behaviours which were more in keeping with the expectations of being quiet and isolated (fieldnotes-November 3, 1992).

Relationships With Teachers

It seemed as if the teachers were involved in an endless battle with the students to keep them from conversing with each other during class time. Amanda recounted some of the approaches her teachers employed to reduce the amount of student-talk in classes. Amanda explained that one teacher divided the students into two groups; "Mr. Tilles put the good people on one side of the room and the bad people on the other side of the room" (Amanda 3, p. 6, 309-312).

From Amanda's observations the distinction between good students and bad students was based on the observation that "they talked a lot." Some of the bad students, she noted, were on that side of the room even though they "have a lot of work done, more than I." Continuing, Amanda explained, "I'm on the good side of the room because I'm kind of quiet and I usually do my work when I'm there. The people on the good side of the room can go for bathroom breaks. People on the bad side of the room can't" (Amanda 3, p. 6, 316-328).

Amanda explained that the teachers expected the students to sit in their desks and not to talk (Amanda 3, p.

7). If the students failed to remain quiet some teachers would impose in-class penalties such as being moved to the "good" or "bad" side of the room. Other teachers would assign "study halls" if students talked in class. In study hall students would sit in a classroom with a supervising teacher for a period of time at the end of the school day.

To Amanda there was much about what occurred in the classroom that was threatening. In each class there was an opportunity for something to occur that would embarrass her and cause her to feel foolish or inept.

> I didn't like the work because it was so hard for me. It seemed like everyone else was smarter than me for some reason, and I just felt really dumb. And everyone else could do it and I was afraid to do it because I thought people would laugh because I wasn't as smart as them. (Amanda 2, p. 10, 500-508)

One such threatening situation existed when a teacher asked students to read aloud. To Amanda this was something to be avoided.

> It was a huge fear because I didn't know how to read like the other kids, and I still don't. Ms. Roberts said 'this year we're going go through every class and a person is going to read a part of something.' When I heard her say that I'm out of there.
>
> The thought of trying it out really scared me. So I walked over to her and I said, "may I go to the washroom, I'll be quick." I knew by the three minutes I was out of class, they'd be done reading this, I'd come back and wouldn't have to worry about it. (Amanda 2, pp. 4-5, 210-226)

Amanda's reading and writing difficulties resulted in much more time being required for her to complete assignments. This problem was compounded by the speed at

which the teachers progressed through the courses in the semester system.

> They're just zooming through it. They [teachers] say "no time, no time. You have to get through this." That's exactly what they say. "If we don't rush right through this and you don't learn it quick, too bad because the semester is only so long." (Amanda 8, p. 6, 293-299)

Amanda found the pace teachers maintained to be extremely frustrating. Frequently Amanda would still be struggling with a previous assignment when a new topic and accompanying assignments would be introduced. The speed at which teachers moved through the programs of study caused Amanda to refer to one teacher as behaving like a "fast food restaurant. Just teach them and move on," she contended (Amanda 8, p. 16, 844-846).

Amanda's difficulty with the pace of the programs was addressed very differently by her teachers. One teacher would allow her extra time to complete assignments and another teacher established an individualized program where she could progress at her own pace. These considerations allowed Amanda to get assistance in the Special Projects class. Another teacher gave all of the students, including Amanda, the same measure of time to complete each assignment. In this course Amanda was falling further and further behind.

In her last taped interview, Amanda once again reflected on failing grade one. In a final plea for students who experienced difficulties similar to her own she

suggested that optional approaches to schooling must be provided for students.

> They have to change it somehow. Maybe if every student could work at their own pace or something. Like if they said, "you have to get through all this material before you can go to junior high," or something and it's equivalent to six years, and work at your own speed. Every child is different, they learn differently, they learn at different speeds, everything. Some people can learn something in one day and another person would learn it in a week. It's not really fair. (Amanda 8, p. 10, 533-546)

Getting to Class

During my class observations I frequently noted that a number of students would gradually wander into the classroom during the first fifteen minutes. Socializing in the halls appeared to be a priority for many of these students. Amanda described an extensive and varied social life existing in the halls of the school, both between and during classes. This included varied discussions between students near their lockers or in the cafeteria and, for some of them, visiting the girl who cuts and curls hair in the hallway (Amanda 3, p. 11).

When I asked Amanda what the teachers would do when students were late for class, she explained that students knew which teachers would assign study hall for being late and which teachers were more lenient about assigning such penalties. Greater efforts were made to arrive at the beginning of class for the less lenient teachers. As Amanda noted, "you can be late for certain teachers and some teachers you can't be. Mrs. Roberts, try not to be late for

her class. For Mrs. Edwards, if you come a half hour late, oh well" (Amanda 6, p. 7, 344-348).

Even those teachers like Mrs. Roberts, who were thought to assign study halls for being late, seldom actually did so. The class records indicated that Mrs. Roberts gave Amanda only one such punishment for her tardiness.

Relationships With Other Students

Even though this was her second year at Gilford, Amanda did not feel that she had established friendships at the school. She had some acquaintances at Gilford, but no one she viewed as a friend. Amanda had been unable to break into the cliques she believed had developed before the students arrived at Gilford.

> Well, of course I wanted friends and I wanted to fit in. I went there and I went to my classes and I met people. They were nice. But it's hard. A lot of these kids go to school, elementary, junior high, then high school together. They already have their friends. (Amanda 7, p. 4, 182-189)

Amanda suggested that a primary concern of students is to fit in and to find ways to connect with one another. Amanda felt that at Gilford there were limited opportunities for her to do so. If a student did not have a history with other students in the school, school teams were the only avenue Amanda viewed as being available as a way to become acquainted with other students. Amanda, though, did not feel that she was very athletic or good at the sports offered in this school. Thus, fitting in did not seem to her to be a likely prospect.

Leaving High School

Amanda's decision to stop attending classes and leave school was the result of a series of circumstances. Some, like her fear of failure and missing classes when testing would occur (Amanda 2, p. 15), began at an early age. Other situations were more recent.

The Attendance Policy

An event that increased the pressure for Amanda to leave school occurred in one of her classes.

> I was in the class. Everything was going fine. I was sick one day and I went to tell her why and she said, "I don't want to know." She's kind of at the end where she doesn't want any reason, no excuse, nothing. So I just said "o.k." and I went and sat down and then we were going to have a test that day and I asked her if I could go do it in Mrs. Webber's room. From Mrs. Webber's room, I'm allowed, I have a privilege of going down there, getting them either to read to me or scribe for me. Anything I want to say they'll write it down because my vocabulary is bad. My vocabulary is good but I misspell words really bad. So they'll dock me marks because I won't know what I'm saying. So, they'll just scribe for me and things like this. So I asked her if I could do that and she just kind of said, "Well, it's getting harder and harder and if you want to write in a separate class. I don't think you should be in my class any more." She says, "I highly recommend that you drop this course. You have a very slim chance of passing," meaning that if you stay here, you're going to fail. (Amanda 3, p. 1, 12-44)

The teacher said "she wished we could have started over," Amanda recounted, "but because I have so many absences she has the right to have me kicked out" (Amanda 3, p. 2, 81-84).

Pressure and Stress Associated With School Work

Once Amanda had decided she would quit Social Studies

she was left with three classes: Mathematics, English and the class designed to offer her assistance with her learning difficulties, where she was also able to receive assistance with her other course work. Amanda believed that at this time (November, 1992) she was passing Mathematics and had a mark of approximately 70% in English. She mentioned that even though she no longer had to worry about the overdue assignments in Social Studies, she had overdue assignments in her remaining courses and many more assignments forthcoming. She appeared to be feeling overwhelmed by the course work and the limited time in which she had to complete it.

By November 18, 1992 (Interview 3) Amanda was complaining about the constant pressure from various individuals.

> I don't want someone pushing me because it just pushes me over the edge. . . . Charles [Amanda's boyfriend] pushes me to go to school sometimes when I'm sick. It seems like everyone is pushing, my teachers, everyone, my boyfriend, everyone. They push me and I just want to say "Forget it. I quit!" I don't need all this hassle and all this pushing. I need a little bit of understanding. . . . Teachers think if they push, then they'll get the job done. Maybe. (Amanda 3, p. 13, 708-720).

Relationships With Teachers

In her discussions about the teachers she had encountered, Amanda indicated that most of them did not seem to care about her or attempt to understand her or the difficulties she faced in high school. Amanda suggested that her teachers would attempt to coerce or embarrass

students into doing the assignments. Many of these tactics, when experienced by Amanda, appeared to further alienate her.

> I don't really love being in high school when I'm 18, but I'm here and I don't like it when my teachers treat me like I'm two years old. That bothers me and it kind of hurts my feelings. I'm a person. Why should you treat me badly? Just because you're the teacher? (Amanda 3, p. 15, 785-793)

The Decision to Leave

During the last week in November, Amanda left Gilford and did not return. She and I had several telephone conversations after she left school, but it was not until December 3 that Amanda and I were able to meet. We first talked about her new job at the downtown car wash and, eventually, of matters relating to school and why she quit.

Amanda's decision to leave school appears to have been the result of a number of occurrences. Some, like quitting Social Studies and thus being unable to fulfil her graduation plans, certainly influenced this decision.

> I guess I felt that maybe it wasn't going anywhere and neither was I. I just wanted to work. I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to be with the people. (Amanda 4, p. 12, 608-612)

Amanda noted that the decision to leave school was the result of a series of events occurring over a span of time.

> I didn't just up and at that minute think hey, I want to drop out of school. There were just things leading up to it. I was going to try and hang on until the end of January, but then Ms. Roberts kicked me out and it seemed like everything was falling apart and it was getting so hard. (Amanda 5, p. 20, 1068-1076)

Amanda mentioned that soon after leaving school several of her friends told her she would regret her decision to quit school. Amanda admitted that this was, in part, true, but she expressed conflicting ideas about her decision to withdraw from school. While she said she believed in the value of an education and thus had some regrets about leaving school, Amanda stated that she would have had more regrets if she had remained.

> I know it's important, but I'm not happy. People say that I'll regret it later in life. Well, I'm regretting it right now. I would regret staying at school right now and maybe I will get my education later, but I just don't want to be there. (Amanda 4, p. 3, 119-126)

Additional Income

Her difficulties with, and fear about, assignments and tests and feeling that she was not understood or supported by the teachers appear to have played a part in her decision to leave school. Another reason for leaving school was her desire to acquire additional disposable income. She stated that she wanted to start earning more money than she was able to earn with part time jobs or the social assistance she was receiving while attending school.

> I'm tired of being broke. I don't like not having money. The money I make now I can probably bank about $700 a month, every month if I wanted to. That's pretty good. If I banked that much every month, I would probably have a down payment for a condo or a house. Eventually I would like to buy a house or a condo maybe in a year or two, probably two. Make a down payment and maybe pay something like $500 every month.

Amanda continued to describe what she was now doing with the

money she was earning.

> Well, I buy a lot more clothes now. My insurance is coming up and that's about $300 for six months. After everything is paid off, I don't really have any bills besides my insurance and $300 for rent every month and some food and gas, but besides that, I have money to spend on whatever. (Amanda 5, p. 23, 1218-1242)

Relationships With Other Students

As Amanda reflected on the events surrounding her leaving school, the event she revealed as triggering this action did not appear to be a result of her relationships with the teachers or other staff members of the school. Nor was it the incomplete assignments, poor grades, or even her desire to acquire more money. The trigger appears to have been the deterioration of her sense of self worth in the presence of other students at the school.

> Well, the kids seem so immature and it's not because I feel like Ms. Maturity or something, it's just sometimes they do really cruel and stupid things. Why would someone want to do that to someone else? I was tired of people treating me like . . . . (Amanda 5, p. 20, 1084-1090)

On the day she quit school, Amanda discovered that something demeaning had been written about her on a locker situated near her locker.

> It was so immature that they would actually want to try and hurt your feelings by writing something on your locker. That was nasty and I know the people. These are people I know that are right down the halls, that are in this one group. They are so immature. It's hard. I could have just said well, hey, I'll just change my locker, but all those other people are my friends and it's hard to make a lot of new friends, especially after you've been in the school for awhile and everyone already has friends. So it's really hard. (Amanda 4, p. 8, 393-409)

After discovering this message that may have been read by other students in the hallway, she phoned her boyfriend and requested that he drive to the school and pick her up.

> Charles had borrowed my car that day. I called him and I was upset and he came and picked me up. . . . I told him that I don't want to go back, that I hate school and I want to get a job. So I looked in the paper. (Amanda 4, p. 9, 457-469)

Amanda did not return to Gilford. She did not contact anyone at the school about her decision to leave (Amanda 5, p. 19), and since her departure she has not been contacted by school personnel, nor has she been contacted by students she met while attending the school. When she left on that day in November she rushed out of the school without collecting her belongings. Her boyfriend returned several days later and cleared her locker of her possessions.

Employment: An Alternative to Attending School

When Amanda arrived at her apartment after having left the school she began to search through the newspaper for a job. She discovered a position as a cashier at a downtown car wash. The next morning she applied for the job.

> Then the next morning when they opened, I was there. She said she had to talk to three other applicants and I only filled out an application for them and I found my resume so I brought my resume back over to them, and then she said to start tomorrow at 8:00 A.M. (Amanda 4, p. 9, 474-482)

A Sense of Self-Worth

Amanda mentioned that she did have some difficulty getting up for work, a difficulty she similarly faced when getting up for school (Amanda 2, p. 29). However, since she

began to work at the car wash she has been getting up every morning at 5:30 am and during the first six weeks of work she had not missed a day of work nor had she been late (Amanda 6, p. 2). Amanda was uncertain why she was able to get to work without difficulty. "I don't know why I'm on time for work and why I couldn't be on time for school" (Amanda 6, p. 6, 312-314). Further discussion, though, revealed at least one reason for the differing behaviour and illustrated a distinction Amanda made about being prompt for work and not school.

> If I'm late for work I feel really guilty. I hate calling in and saying I'm going to be late or my car won't start or anything. I feel so bad. But, if you don't come to school, who cares? (Amanda 6, pp. 6-7, 326-331)

Amanda felt her presence was important for the business to run efficiently. "No one can cover me. If I'm not there, who's going to do it? There is no other cashier there. It's just me. So if I'm not there that really messes things up" (Amanda 6, p. 8, 387-391). At school, conversely, Amanda did not sense that being punctual was important.

> Everyone is late. It's just a known fact that kids are late every day and they walk into class late. This is how it goes. We'll stand at our lockers. We'll go to the cafeteria before we go to class and so what, the bell went. We'll get there when we feel like it. I think it's [work] a little different. (Amanda 6, p. 7, 331-339)

Amanda felt her presence at the car wash was appreciated. She appreciated the treatment she typically received from her supervisor, other employees, and customers at the car wash. She described several circumstances where

they treated her very differently than what she had experienced with the adults and youth at school.

> Well, the customers are usually very nice. . . . I get treated half decently. The people there, I don't know what you'd call them, uneducated I guess, they're funny. They're nice. They're nice people. You don't get any snobs. They're very nice. (Amanda 4, p. 11, 551-569)

When I asked Amanda about the nature of the difference in the treatment, she provided the following explanation.

> They're friendly, they don't say bad things about me. If they do, I don't know about it. It's kind of neat, almost everyone of them . . . thought I was 20 to 22. My head just kind of rolled, it's kind of neat. But I hope when I get older, people think I'm younger. (Amanda 4, p. 11, 551-585)

Future Plans

When asked whether she was planning to return to school, Amanda explained that her immediate plans did not include school. Instead, they revolved around full time employment and earning money, but she did not discount returning to school sometime in the future.

> Right now I have no plans so far. I'm going to stay at this job and make some money. I don't have any plans to go back to high school. Like if I want, I can go back in January. If I want I can go back in September. I'm not worried about that. Even if I work until next semester, that's fine. I can go back. Then maybe after that year I'll go to [vocational college] or something. Right now I have no plan whatsoever. I want to work and save. Maybe I'll go back. (Amanda 4, p. 11, 590-603)

At this time going back to school would only have been a consideration if the job at the car wash did not work out, that is if she was no longer treated with respect or her work was no longer appreciated, and if she did not receive

an increase in wages (Amanda 4, p. 15). If she ever wants to return to school, she noted, it will always be there for her. However, even after leaving this position at the car wash and eventually acquiring another job, she still chose not to return to school.

> If it's a mistake, it can be fixed. There's always school out there, even for adults. We'll just see how it goes and if I decide hey, work's too hard, or I don't want to do this all my life, then maybe I'll go back. (Amanda 5, p. 14, 760-767)

Reflections

The fifth interview occurred on December 10, 1992, approximately one month after Amanda left Gilford. Her descriptions of high school had changed very little during this time, but for the first time since our interviews began, when Amanda reflected on her school experiences she did not become distraught.

> I was really sad in school. I was really sad. It wasn't like I was going to go jump off a bridge or something, but I was really sad. I guess I was tired of being sad too. Now I'm happy because I don't worry. I get a pay cheque. Christmas is coming up. I don't have to worry about assignments or deadlines or final exams, nothing. All I have to do is go into work tomorrow, dress nice, be smiley to all the customers, try my best, and that's it. It's easy. I'm a lot happier. I don't go home and be sad about "oh God, I got to do this assignment tonight." Then I'll worry about it for the next seven hours and then just before I go to bed, it's like, now it's too late to do the assignment and tomorrow I'll go into school feeling like total dirt because I didn't do the assignment and the teacher will give me total heck and then I'll feel even worse for not doing it. So I worried my whole night, I went to bed tired and upset, woke up tired and upset because now I have to go to school and deal with the teacher being upset with me. And feeling bad

> because I never got the assignment done, and knowing I'll still have to do it. But now I don't have to worry about stuff like that. I go home. I do whatever I want to. I don't have to take my work home with me. My work stays at work. (Amanda 5, pp. 27-28, 1465-1501)

Amanda also shared her perceptions of what she believed other students think of school. She suggested that frequently students will respond to "what did you do at school today?" with statements like, "nothing" or "it was boring." She noted that such statements tend to reflect the lack of relevance that school has for many students.

> Maybe they learned something that they don't really care about, but they probably didn't learn anything that really means anything to them that they want to remember, that this is important to me I'm going to keep this. If you learn something you don't really feel is important or you don't care about it, you're not going to keep it. (Amanda 6, p. 1, 7-16)

Amanda elaborated by suggesting that most youth are uncertain why they are attending school except, perhaps, to acquire a high school diploma.

> Most kids are in school because their parents want them to be. They do want an education. They don't know why. They just feel they should. Like what else are they going to do, get a McDonald's job or just stay here for now and get a high school diploma? That's how I feel. Most kids are so confused. (Amanda 6, p. 1, 33-41)

During the interview of January 7, I asked Amanda if she had any thoughts about going back to school as, during an earlier interview, she had indicated that she might return for the second semester at Gilford. Her response suggested that school was not something to which she was prepared to return. "I don't think I'm ready to go back in

January. It would be way too soon. I could do it if I wanted to, but I'm just not ready. Maybe in September." (Amanda 7, p. 12, 624-628)

Conclusion

Throughout the study Amanda expressed an interest in the research and a belief in its importance. She suggested that, perhaps, as a result students' voices would be heard and student experiences at school could improve.

> I think what you're doing is good. Maybe, hopefully, it will change something. If not, what can you do? I hope it does. I hope maybe some people will open their eyes with it. (Amanda 7, p. 12, 655-660)

On June 5, 1993, I telephoned Amanda to arrange for us to review the first draft of this story. On this occasion she explained that she had stopped working at the car wash four weeks earlier, planning to remain unemployed for a time in order to enjoy the summer with her friends. This period of leisure, though, did not last long. For after two weeks Amanda acquired employment as a car jockey at a local automobile dealership, where she continues to work.

KAREN

Karen was born in Baldwin in 1976 and currently resides with her mother and father and her 14 year old brother. When the family changed residences eleven years ago, the house they purchased was only a few blocks away from their former residence. Thus Karen has lived in the same community all her life.

Karen attended two schools before coming to Gilford,

Maple Elementary School and Elm Junior High School. Karen spoke fondly about her experiences at these schools. Once she reached high school, however, she began to experience difficulties. The grades now being attained were much lower than those she had received in previous grades. It was not long before Karen stopped studying and doing homework, choosing instead to socialize in the evenings with friends.

Becoming a Participant in the Study

The October 13th attendance records indicated that between August 31 and October 9, Karen had accumulated 41 absences, the greatest number of absences of the four students I initially approached to become participants in the study. She had already been "terminated" from one course due to her many absences.

I began my observations in two of Karen's classes on October 26, 1992. On October 28, I approached Karen and talked to her about the study and provided her with a copy of the materials I had prepared for the participants and their parents. She agreed to take the letter home to her parents and return the release form at the end of the week. It was not until November 12, however, that Karen and I were able to arrange an opportunity for an interview. As with Amanda and Carl, we went to a restaurant near the school. We completed six taped interviews during the three months remaining in the semester.

Coming to High School

Two high schools were located only six blocks from

Karen's home, yet she and a number of her friends chose to attend Gilford High School rather than those high schools in closer proximity to their homes. This choice of high schools required Karen to spend an extra thirty minutes twice a day travelling between home and school. Yet as we continued to discuss her choice of high schools, it became apparent that Karen viewed this inconvenience as an acceptable price to pay.

The Importance of School Size

Karen noted that approximately half the number of students attended Gilford compared to each of the two high schools located near her home. A smaller student population was an important consideration for her and several of her friends when selecting a school.

> If you go to a big school and there's an extra 800 students, it's kind of scary to think that there's many more people. If there's less people, you get to know people faster and get to know more people and then pretty soon you know a lot of people and then almost the whole school you get to know. (Karen 2, p. 2, 86-95)

The scale of the school provided Karen with a greater opportunity to become acquainted with other students in the school and to acquire a greater sense of acceptance in this new environment. The size of the school also provided Karen with a sense of safety and security.

Karen noted that the level of violence in a number of the high schools was causing her friends attending those schools to be concerned about their safety. Her friends observed that a number of groups have formed around racial

and ethnic backgrounds and fights between these groups have erupted. "I have a couple of friends that went to Westwood High School," Karen noted. "They say they don't like it there. They say, 'Well, because of the racial groups go there.' They're pretty big and they always fight, and stuff like that" (Karen 2, pp. 3-4, 165-188).

Karen explained that in one of the schools several of her friends attended, they were frightened due to the lack of safety. "It is scary to go to that school," Karen explained, "because people get beat up in the washrooms and stuff" (Karen 2, p. 23, 1240-1242). At Gilford, though, she felt safe.

When I asked Karen what she believed made this school different from the other schools we had been discussing she returned to the importance of the size of the school and the effect it can have on the people in the school.

> Because of its size I think. There's not many cliques then either. Everybody's usually friends with everybody. There are some fights, but that always happens. (Karen 2, p. 24, 1306-1310)

Karen saw the smaller scale of the school as providing her with a greater opportunity for safety and acceptance from fellow students. As Karen said, "I feel more comfortable in a smaller school" (Karen 2, p. 2, 106-108).

The Transition to High School

Karen found her first year in high school to be very difficult compared to her earlier experiences in school. Previously, Karen explained, she had been achieving high

marks in her subjects. In the past, Karen had not found school work to be difficult, but when she came to the high school that seemed to change.

> [In] Grade eight and nine I found myself to be really smart. . . . I was interested, really interested in school. Then all of a sudden grade ten came along and I was like, I don't like this. I don't really like high school either. I thought grade ten would be wonderful, but I got there and I hated it. (Karen 2, p. 10, 516-525)

Grade ten proved to be a very difficult year for Karen. While she did not fail any of her courses, she received marks much lower than she had been receiving in her previous grades.

Karen suggested that she had entered high school unprepared for the course work she would encounter. "I found my [school] work to be very hard. Stuff I didn't know of in grade nine and I got to grade ten and had to learn something brand new and that was very difficult" (Karen 2, p. 3, 124-128).

One of the courses in which she encountered difficulties was Mathematics, a subject in which she demonstrated a proficiency in junior high school.

> I was really good in Math. I got honour's in Math. Then when I came to grade ten, there was nothing the same of grade nine in grade ten. Grade ten was all new stuff. We had to learn a whole new curriculum. It was really difficult. . . because it was all new and it wasn't stuff we learned back in junior high. (Karen 2, p. 3, 135-146)

Karen suggested that some of her present difficulties experienced in high school were the result of deficiencies

in English that developed in elementary school.

> English has never been something good for me because when I was in elementary, I was in a two-three split and I was in grade two and I was with grade threes, so I missed the phonics unit. I still to this day do not know how to sound out words. (Karen 3, p. 21, 1143-1149)

Karen traced her present difficulties to a series of events that occurred while she was in grade three. Events in elementary school were presented as an explanation for her present lack of skills necessary for her present courses, and her ongoing difficulties in English. "English," she noted, "has never been a good subject of mine. I cannot write. I cannot express myself. I cannot read. I can barely sound out big words. Like, I mean, people always laugh at me" (Karen 3, p. 22, 1164-1169).

Karen explained that her lack of success in grade ten was partially attributable to previous experiences in school. She noted, however, that during grade ten she had stopped studying and no longer did homework. "I didn't pay any attention to studying or doing homework," she recounted. "I went through the whole year last year not doing any homework. I didn't do no homework last year" (Karen 2, p. 10, 497-501).

Karen chose instead to spend the evenings with friends. "I was out until 11:00 [p.m.] or 12:00 [p.m.] every night last year," she recounted.

> I was usually at hockey games. I went to hockey games a lot. I'm not going to do that no more. I was so tired too, and I dreaded school even more because I was tired. I was up until 12:00 every

> night. I wouldn't do my homework either. I'd be more interested in going to the hockey game. No time for my homework. Hockey was more important. (Karen 2, pp. 21-22, 1139-1168)

Karen completed her first year in high school. She received passing grades in the courses, but grade ten had proven to be a very difficult year for her.

> Last year I was in Social and I was on borderline the whole year, just about failing, but I didn't. I ended up getting 41 credits. I passed all my subjects that I took, but I just didn't do well in them. (Karen 2, p. 9, 474-477)

The Fall Semester of Grade Eleven

Summer holidays had ended. It was time to return to school and begin grade eleven, but Karen explained, she was not ready to return.

> I just didn't want to go back to school. I just wasn't in the mood to go to school. You have two months off then you have to get into the routine again. I just didn't want to get into the routine of having to go to school, so I just didn't. (Karen 6, p. 2, 86-93)

During the first month of school Karen would appear to be leaving for school in the mornings, but after she left the house she would frequently meet one of her friends and, as Karen explained, the "two of us just kind of buggered off" (Karen 6, p. 2, 99-100). Together they would travel around the city in her friend's car.

Once Karen had begun to miss classes, it appeared to become easier to continue to miss than to attend school. Karen explained that she had become trapped in a cycle of skipping.

> Well because I skipped the previous class then my

> teacher would yell at me and then I'd feel sorry for myself and then I wouldn't want to go to the next class because then it's just a big circle. It keeps happening and then you keep doing it. "Well, I don't want to go to school tomorrow." (Karen 3, p. 34, 1815-1824)

The school sent attendance letters to Karen's home to inform her parents of Karen's absences from her courses. The letters, though, were intercepted by Karen before they were seen by her parents. She explained that it was a simple matter to collect these easily identifiable attendance letters from the mailbox before her parents found them.

In early September, Karen had several altercations with her parents and, for a period of time, moved away from home. After living with friends for three weeks and attending classes infrequently, Karen decided to return home. She also decided it was time to return to school.

The school administration, Karen recounted, "threatened to kick me out three times. . . . Finally after the third time I stopped and thought maybe it's time I start going to school" (Karen 6, p. 3, 125-129). Karen also noted that during this time her friends who were attending school had been continuously harassing her to return to Gilford.

Karen eventually revealed that the girl with whom she had spend so much time in September had dropped out of school. She dropped out, Karen suggested, because "she didn't know when to stop. I knew when to stop." Karen also noted that she had not seen the girl since returning to

school (Karen 6, p. 3, 115-116).

School Work and Other Interests

The final interview took place the week prior to final examinations. One of the upcoming examinations, for a course in which she had been experiencing difficulties, was to be written early the next week. Karen explained that she had little time to prepare for that examination or the other ones she would have to write. "I'll probably study for about three hours and that's it," Karen stated.

Karen explained that she did not plan to prepare for these examinations during the week and when I asked her what was limiting her time to study, she reminded me that she was employed on a part-time basis at McDonald's Restaurant. "I'm working that weekend. I'm working all weekend and I'm closing. So I'm working until 11:30 or 12:00 [p.m.]" (Karen 7, p. 10, 502-505).

Karen's study plan was based on what she felt worked for her on a previous occasion, that is studying in the early hours of the morning. "I remember last year," Karen recounted, "when I was studying for my finals, I studied from 1:00 [a.m.] to 3:00 [a.m.] in the morning and I found I did really well" (Karen 7, p. 10, 516-520).

Karen usually did not have homework, explaining that by taking only three courses one seldom needed to do more than one hour of school work a week. She explained that this amount of work could be completed in class or during her morning spare (Karen 4, p. 20, 1048-1049).

Karen divided her time after school between a number of activities. Karen was a member of a school team, practicing most days after school for several hours and, on the remaining days, playing against competing teams. Karen also volunteered to coach rhythmic gymnastics on Tuesday evening and Saturday. Additionally, Karen held two after-school jobs, one at a fashion store near her home and the other at a McDonald's Restaurant. While the hours of employment varied, she could work up to 25 hours per week, 15 hours at the fashion store and approximately 10 hours at the restaurant (Karen 4, pp. 9-10; Karen 5, pp. 9-10).

When I asked Karen what her parents thought about her activities after school, she indicated that they had some concerns about her not being able to keep up with all the things in which she is involved. Overall, though, she felt they were happy because she did not request money from them. "They don't mind at all," she explained, "because then I'm not asking them for money. They just don't think I'm going to be able to do everything" (Karen 4, p. 10, 537-540).

Karen explained that with the money she had earned by the summer she would purchase a jeep. Her parents, she noted, had already promised to pay half of the purchase price (Karen 4, p. 10).

Grades

The week prior to the final examinations for the courses of first semester, I asked Karen what grades she hoped to acquire. She said she thought she could get 80% in

Mathematics because it was so effortless for her, but her expectations for the other two courses were much lower. "Fifty [percent], she stated, would suit me fine" (Karen 7, p. 11, 554).

Karen suggested that there was little reason to spend the time necessary to achieve anything more than passing grades. After all, she noted, grade eleven classes were "low classes" (Karen 7, pp. 10-11, 546-554). Karen did not believe there was any value in acquiring more than passing grades in these classes. "I feel like this isn't important. Grade eleven isn't that important. Grade twelve is important" (Karen 3, p. 23, 1251-1253).

Karen recognized that the grades a student acquires can have a dramatic effect on that person's acceptance by post-secondary institutions. Grade eleven, though, did not seem to be the time to dedicate to achieving grades that would facilitate acceptance by such institutions. "It takes too much time," Karen explained. "I don't want to spend my whole life doing homework. I'm saving that for university" (Karen 4, p. 20, 1053-1055).

Karen also explained that acquiring "high" grades in school was something that tended to separate you from other students. You are viewed as being a "nerd" by the other students, she noted. Karen revealed that her younger brother who had just entered junior high school was currently getting high grades. While she was proud of his success she felt that his views regarding school success and

high grades, like her views regarding this matter, would soon change.

> My brother is pretty smart. He just went into junior high this year. Before that he was really into good grades and stuff like that, but now I don't know. With him being in junior high I think his views are going to change, because mine did. (Karen 3, p. 25, 1355-1363)

Karen explained that her younger brother would soon realize that receiving high grades was something to avoid if he was to be popular with his peers at school. "You try to be cool and you have to be cool and get low marks" (Karen 3, pp. 25-26, 1374-1376). Being popular at school, according to Karen, was a critical concern for students. So acquiring low grades and skipping classes were done, at least partially, to achieve this objective.

> I don't think there's any way to avoid that because every kid's dream is to be popular. Right? Every kid's dream is that. So they try to be popular by saying, "I'm going to be cool and skip class or I'm going to be cool and do that," and it all becomes to be habit. And then it happens to you throughout your school years, for the rest of your life until you're done school or even if you finish school. It happens to you. (Karen 3, p. 26, 1400-1412)

Completing High School: The Four Year Plan

Karen was acquiring her highest marks in a grade eleven general level Mathematics course. She had received 100% on the past few tests that had been given in this subject. She also had 16 absences in this class by the mid-term reporting period, the greatest number of absences in any of her classes.

I asked Karen why, if this subject was so easy for her,

she had chosen to take the general program rather than the advanced program. She explained that the general level was recommended to her based on her weak performance in Mathematics last year. Her grade ten Mathematics teacher recommended that she first complete the grade eleven general level and then repeat grade eleven Mathematics, but this time at the advanced level. For Karen, the present course is merely preparation for the advanced program. "I don't learn much in Math. I'm there. It's kind of basically a review. . . . I want it to help me with my Math [advanced level]" (Karen 5, p. 19, 1023-1025).

Taking the general level, she anticipated, would help prepare her for the advanced level next year. Doing this first, Karen explained, would "kind of give me an idea of what Math 20 is going to be about so I don't go in there and have all these surprises" (Karen 6, p. 2, 59-62).

As grade twelve is viewed as the important year in terms of course grades, Karen plans to take only a few courses each term. She may also retake some grade twelve courses. Karen noted that a number of her friends are currently taking a second year of grade twelve and that she is also planning to take two years to complete this grade by retaking courses in which she received grades lower than 70 percent or taking the advanced level after first completing the general level (Karen 2, pp. 16-17). She believes it will take her this long to complete grade twelve in order to

receive "good marks to get into university" (Karen 5, p. 20, 1069-1070).

Future Plans

Karen viewed school as providing her with the promise of future success. I'm going to school, she said, "so I'm not a bum when I grow up" (Karen 5, p. 23, 1218-1219). Her father, who completed school up to grade nine, has pressured Karen to do better than he did. "He wants me to go somewhere," she recalled. "He was always saying, 'don't follow in my footsteps'" (Karen 3, p. 25, 1334-1341).

Karen plans to attend university after completing high school, but she is uncertain of the faculty she will enter or what kind of employment she will pursue after completing university. When Karen was in junior high school she had plans to be an orthodontist, but these plans were abandoned after entering high school.

> At first when I was in Junior High and I was on the honour roll and I was getting excellent marks, I really wanted to become an orthodontist, but then I thought I'd never get the marks to become an orthodontist. (Karen 2, p. 15, 774-780)

As a result of being able to share an experience with one of her friends, Karen has recently begun to consider nursing as a possible future career.

> I'd like to go into nursing. A friend of mine ended up becoming pregnant so I went through everything with her and I really enjoyed it and I just enjoy helping people. I'd really like to go into Maternity. (Karen 2, pp. 14-15, 768-774)

Karen considered her experience of assisting her friend with her pregnancy and the impact it had on her decision for

a career.

> Ya, it was so touching to me and I enjoyed my whole experience there. I was in the hospital for three days with her and I was her nurse basically because I did everything for her. I just loved it. I was quite shocked to see a baby being born. I just really enjoyed it and right then and there I decided this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. (Karen 2, p. 16, 826-836)

Karen has received support for her choice of careers from her friends. This support was, for Karen, an important confirmation of her plan.

> All my friends, especially the one that had the baby, said I will be a wonderful nurse and all my friends think I'm going to be a good one, too. That's kind of a reassuring thing to think that your friends say, "ya, you're going to be a good nurse." (Karen 4, p. 15, 784-791)

As a result of checking with the Faculty of Nursing, Karen has begun to plan the courses and the grades she will require to enter the Nursing program at the university. She has already decided to retake any grade twelve courses in which she receives final grades of less than 80 percent. "If I don't get 80's," she declared, "I might as well just take it again. If I get a 79 I'll take it over again" (Karen 2, p. 16, 876-879).

This decision to repeat grades was partially due to her perception of the entry requirements, that less than an 80% in any of her subjects will exclude her from acceptance to the faculty. It is also due to her understanding of the meaning of a grade in a course and the perceived relevance of high school subjects with respect to the university courses. Karen does not want to repeat what happened to her

when she entered grade ten. She does not want to be unprepared for the courses she will take at university.

> I don't go into university and think "Oh my God." Of course it will be new, but I'd like to know. If I'm taking my Bio. and I'm getting only a 60 and I go into whatever I have to go into in university . . . and I only know 60 percent of the stuff, I'd rather know a lot about it. I'd rather be able to do it right instead of having to go into university and think "I don't remember how to do this. I didn't do well in this." (Karen 2, p. 17, 920-934)

Karen indicated that by taking several of her grade 12 courses a second time she will be more prepared for these later courses and it will help her to avoid the difficulties she has encountered previously with the transition into a new program of studies.

In planning her career in nursing, Karen also checked with several personal contacts who were in nursing, a friend's sister and the wife of one of her elementary school teachers. She found these individuals extremely helpful because they provided her with details about the school courses in which one must excel as well as some understanding of the realities of being a nurse. "This is what you have to expect," one of them told Karen. "Like nursing isn't always going to be fun. It's going to be sad sometimes. It's going to be all this stuff" (Karen 2, p. 19, 991-995).

Karen explained that she was uncertain of all the requirements demanded by the university for the nursing program. However, she objected to my suggestion of

contacting one of the guidance counsellors to acquire this information. Guidance counsellors, she declared, were not to be trusted.

> You hear stories that you shouldn't trust nobody. If you go and say you spill your guts to them or you go and talk about this or something, they turn around and go call your parents. That's what I heard. (Karen 2, p. 19, 1039-1048)

While Karen has some definite plans towards preparing for her future vocation and recognizes the importance of school in achieving these goals, several of her friends have not begun developing such plans. Karen believed the lack of goals has had a dramatic effect on what her friends chose to do about their schooling and the effect it has on their education, and potentially, their future choices and opportunities. "It affects their attitudes towards school," Karen suggested. She suggested that a typical response from these students would be "like who cares? I have nothing to become. Why don't I just get my general diploma and work at anything?"

The Day-to-Day Experiences in High School

During the study Karen was enroled in three courses and while there was much that was different about these courses, there was much that was very similar. In her classes, Karen noted that students were typically expected by the classroom teacher to be sitting at their desks and listening to what the teacher had to say. When at their desks, students were expected to be working alone. This could include reading the textbook, answering questions, writing an essay, or

writing notes provided by the teacher and displayed with an overhead projector (Karen 5, pp. 5, 7; Karen 6, p. 7).

Rules and Punishments

Teachers have, at their disposal, a policy to deal with a number of issues they may face in the classroom. Missing or being late for a class, an incomplete assignment, or engaging in behaviours that may be perceived by the teacher as class disruptions, such as talking to others, can all be reasons for assigning a study hall (Karen 5, p. 26; Interview with the principal of Gilford High School).

For approximately 90 minutes at the end of the school day students who are assigned a study hall must attend a classroom where one teacher supervises 30 to 40 students. Karen explained that her experience with study halls has been that for that period of time students sit in a classroom, put their heads down and sleep, or "just sit there and stare at the wall" until they have served their time (Karen 5, p. 25, 1328).

Not all teachers, Karen contended, supported study halls (Karen 5, p. 27). Also, teachers varied in their interpretation of when a student is late for class (Karen 3, p. 20), and those teachers who do assign study halls are not consistent about when they assign them. Karen explained that on most occasions one of her teachers will not assign study halls for being late for class. Then one day suddenly this teacher will assign a study hall to ten students who were late for class.

Based on her experiences Karen hypothesized that study halls were assigned when the teacher "was just being a grouch that day" (Karen 5, p. 28, 1518-1519). Karen suggested that study halls may be given more because teachers are angry or frustrated with students than the attempt to maintain school policy. "It's suppose to be some kind of rule that if you do this or if you miss this I think it's just to piss students off, personally. Just to get them mad" (Karen 5, p. 1384-1388).

Karen explained that you had little choice in avoiding study halls once they had been assigned. "You may not want to attend study halls," Karen noted, "but they force you to go because if you don't you can get kicked out of that class" (Karen 3, p. 10, 527-528).

Karen had accumulated more absences in Mathematics than in any of her other courses. I asked if she was being "terminated" from the course as prescribed in the Student Handbook. She seemed shocked that I would consider such a thing and responded by saying, "Why should it [occur]? I'm doing good in that class" (Karen 5, p. 19, 999-1000).

Karen noted that one of the school administrators had approached her about her absences in another class. At that time the administrator also expressed a concern about her numerous absences in Mathematics, but Karen declared that she was doing well in that class and "there's nothing to worry about" (Karen 5, p. 24, 1287-1288). Karen speculated that they wouldn't kick her out of a class in which she was

achieving a high grade. The person who probably would be removed from a course, Karen suggested, was "probably the student who has 20 absences and has a 40 average" (Karen 5, p. 19, 1015-1016).

Relationships With Teachers

Karen provided a brief explanation of the characteristics she believed were essential for a person to be a good teacher. Karen noted that on a particular occasion she had not completed an assignment by its due date. She explained that the teacher had given her an opportunity to submit the assignment the next day and still receive a grade. This teacher, Karen recounted, had been "understanding."

> She gives you chances. She doesn't let you take a zero no matter what. She'll say, o.k. Hand this assignment in tomorrow. If you hand it in tomorrow, you won't have to take a study hall. . . . She understands that maybe one night you can't do all of this homework, that you need an extra night to do it. (Karen 4, p. 17, 883-901)

On this occasion Karen described the teacher in a positive manner, though on two previous occasions, after an altercation between her and the teacher, the person was described in very negative terms. The particular state of the relationship between teacher and student had a dramatic influence on how Karen judged her teachers.

During several interviews Karen noted the importance of teachers being sensitive to students' particular difficulties (Karen 3; Karen 4). Karen related how one teacher assisted her friend to stay in school and attend her

classes in spite of her many absences and the "termination" policy. The teacher, Karen explained, appeared to be sympathetic to the student's personal problems and the difficulties she had been encountering.

> Well, it seems like he goes out of his way to help you. My friend has been having a lot of problems with school this year, too. She hasn't gone to school regularly for two years and she's having a real attendance problem too, you know. And she's been sick and she's moving and she just had a baby and her mom and dad just split up and her grandma just died. This whole year has been a total mess. (Karen 3, p. 15, 796-808)

Karen revealed that this teacher had acted as an advocate for her friend and met with her other teachers. She was readmitted to the courses in which she had been removed and she began to attend school again (Karen 3, pp. 15-16).

Karen explained that students need to feel that they are connecting positively with their teachers. When such a connection does not exist, when a teacher and student do not connect, or, as Karen explained, when there is a "personality conflict," the student suffers.

Karen recounted a story about one of her friends who had been receiving an A average in one of her classes. A stressful situation existed between the teacher and student in the class. There was, as Karen explained, a "personality conflict" between her friend and the teacher and so a positive connection did not exist between the two individuals.

In spite of the fact that the course was required by this student for her to achieve her plans for university,

she attended class irregularly and, on occasion, she would miss two days at a time. When she did attend she continued to receive high grades on her assignments. Eventually she was removed from the class because of the termination clause in the attendance policy (Karen 3, pp. 30-31).

Relationships With Other Students

Positive relationships with teachers and students were critical to Karen. Friends, Karen revealed, were very important in the school you attended. One wanted to have friends in the classes that were attended. As Karen explained, "I'm more comfortable in Social and Math because I have friends, and in English I'm just kind of the loser and I just sit there by myself" (Karen 6, p. 5, 252-256).

Having friends in your classes, Karen indicated, provides you with a group of individuals who can support each other and assist with the assignments. It provides you with people to whom you feel safe turning for help. As Karen explained, "Me and my friend do try to study together, we do our assignments together and we both help each other as much as we can" (Karen 2, p. 13, 711-715).

While not all Karen's friends were in her classes, they had opportunities to meet during the school day. One such meeting place was the hallway where their lockers were located. At the beginning of the school year friends will acquire lockers near one another and thus groups of friends are situated in various areas of the school. "People in our

hallway all know each other," Karen observed (Karen 4, p. 2, 81-82).

Karen also noted that the students tended to group according to common interests. They would wear similar clothes at school and associate with one another on weekends (Karen 4, p. 3, 112-114). Karen observed that individuals involved in a particular sport will congregate in one area of the school, retaining a group of lockers. The group to which Karen was attached was perceived by her as being a distinct group in the school. "People call them freaks of nature," Karen revealed (Karen 4, p. 2, 83-84).

Classroom Lessons

On two occasions, during the seven interviews with Karen, she spoke with excitement about particular classes she had attended. The first occurrence was when Karen began to discuss a new play they had begun in English class.

> Today we started to read Macbeth. Well, we didn't start to read it, we did Shakespearean stuff today. Last year we read Romeo and Juliet and saw the play and everything and I really really enjoyed that. I just love his writing. I find it to be meaningful, the way they used to talk and the way he used to write. Everything they say seems to have meaning. So I'm quite excited to read Macbeth because I really enjoyed Romeo and Juliet. (Karen 2, p. 14, 720-732)

Karen explained that the previous year the students had attended the play after having studied it in class. By studying the play in advance of seeing the performance she explained that she had an understanding of both the story line and the language that she would encounter.

> I knew what was going to happen and I knew what it meant. . . . We went through the book and our teacher explained what it meant in our language, not what like they say, and then when we went to the play. Of course, I understood everything. So it was even more meaningful. So I'm pretty excited to read Macbeth. I don't know what it's about though, but it's by Shakespeare. (Karen 2, p. 14, 741-756)

Within several weeks the desire to study Shakespeare began to wane. While a number of factors may have played a role in this decline in personal interest, not being able to see the play appeared to be an important factor. "I really enjoyed Romeo and Juliet last year. If I maybe would have seen Macbeth this year, I might have liked it better" (Karen 5, p. 7, 350-355).

A second occasion when Karen expressed excitement about class was when one of her teachers initiated a discussion about World War Two and the Holocaust. The teacher described the exhibits in a museum she had visited and, for a period of time, Karen was engrossed in a conversation about the Holocaust.

> I think it was last week we were talking about the Holocaust and we went into a really deep conversation about it and I started to cry. That's how deep it was. She was telling us about everything she went somewhere and she was telling us about how she went there and she went into this kind of museum, but it was about the Holocaust. . . . We just got really talking about it and I was asking question after question and we spent a good 45 minutes talking about that. And it brought tears to my eyes. I was so upset about what I heard. I find that very interesting. (Karen 5, p. 3, 126-148)

Aside from these two occasions, Karen described school as something that had to be endured. You're not "enjoying

it or totally hating it," she explained. "It's just there and you can't change it" (Karen 6, pp. 8-9, 437-445).

Karen would frequently describe her classes as being boring. However, her explanations as to the cause of this boredom varied. One of the reasons Karen gave for finding classes boring was because she could not stay awake in class. On those occasions, Karen recounted, "I was tired and I had fallen asleep the whole time, and I could barely stay awake" (Karen 3, p. 19, 1026-1028).

Karen described fighting a losing battle to stay awake in class.

> I put my head down on the desk and I just nod off for about 10 minutes and then I try and awake up and sit up, but then my head starts nodding off. It's basically what I do the whole class. (Karen 3, p. 20, 1093-1099)

Karen indicated that classes were boring because of the passive role of students in their learning and the repetitive nature of the tasks they performed in the classes. One such class was boring because, "all you do is write essays or you read something. You read a story, then write an essay, read a story, answer questions. It's the same thing all the time" (Karen 6, p. 7, 354-358).

Conclusion

The final interview occurred on January 19, 1992, one week prior to the final examinations for the courses of first semester. This interview lasted thirty minutes and, as with the last several interviews, less time was required to complete the interview. It appeared that there was

progressively less to discuss each time we met.

During conversations that took place during the writing of this story, Karen and I discussed her successful completion of grade eleven and, to some extent, her more recent experiences in grade twelve.

CARL

Carl was born in a small community approximately 30 kilometres north of Baldwin. When Carl was four years of age, he, his older sister, and his parents moved to the city of Baldwin.

When Carl was eleven years of age, the family moved to a community approximately 200 kilometres south of Baldwin. They remained in this community for two years and then returned to Baldwin. The family moved one more time, but remained in the same city. They have lived in this residence for eight years.

By the time Carl entered Gilford High School he had moved four times. He was currently attending his fifth school, having previously changed schools four times in four years.

Becoming a Participant in the Study

At the time of the study, Carl was enroled at Gilford for a third year. He had taken two years to complete grade ten and now was in his first year as a grade eleven student. The October reporting period for student attendance (August 31 to October 9) indicated Carl had been absent on 32 occasions and he had been late 7 times.

While my observations in classrooms at Gilford began on October 8, 1992, it was not until October 26 that I began to attend classes in which Carl was enroled. On November 6, as we left Mathematics class I approached Carl with the request to be a participant in the study. I provided him, as with the other participants, with a copy of the consent form and brief explanation of the study to take to his parents. During the remaining three months of the semester there were seven more interviews with Carl which were taped and transcribed.

Coming to High School

At least one other high school was no greater distance to travel, but for Carl, Gilford, the school his older sister had previously attended, was the school he would attend. Carl offered several reasons for selecting this high school, not the least being because it appeared to be a safer school in which to be a student.

Safety and School Size

Carl enroled in Gilford, he explained, because here the students did not group according to racial or ethnic origins or team affiliations. There did not appear to be gangs at this school and there was very little apparent violence.

> You got your hockey players that hang out, your football players that hang out, Lebanese guys that hang out and then there's black guys that hang out. It's not like that at Gilford. Everybody hangs out together. We don't have that kind of stuff at Gilford. (Carl 5, p. 6, 301-312)

Carl observed that at Gilford "we don't have any bullies or anything. No one to be really scared of" (Carl 6, p. 17, 892-894). While reflecting on the possible reasons for the lack of violence at Gilford, Carl suggested that there were two, perhaps interrelated, reasons for the peaceful nature of Gilford. "Probably because it's a small school," Carl suggested, adding that at Gilford "everybody just knows each other" (Carl 6, p. 16, 867-871).

Carl explained that his parents were aware that it was a "good school" because of discussions they had with other parents about their concerns regarding the schools their children attended. Carl's parents were informed that at Gilford there were fewer incidents relating to drugs or crime than at the other schools in the area (Carl 2, interview notes, p. 2).

A Difficult Beginning

Carl found the transition to high school to be somewhat unsettling. As Carl explained, high school was bigger than junior high school, with so many more people. "I guess I was kind of intimidated. I was small and everybody was so big." Carl, though, found support and a sense of security in the friends who came with him to Gilford and because of his sister and her friends who were, at the time, in grade 12 (Carl 3, p. 11, 551-569).

Grade ten proved to be a difficult year for Carl for many reasons. Entering a new school at the bottom of the "pecking order" was the immediate concern, but this soon

passed. For the longer term the difficulty proved to be the courses he was taking during his first year of high school. During this first year in grade ten he missed very few classes and remained in all of his courses, but he passed few courses.

The Fall Semester of Grade Eleven

At the beginning of this school year, Carl explained, he had missed a number of classes as he had to travel to attend memorial services for his great grandparents. Carl revealed that he continued to miss classes after returning to Baldwin (Carl 3, p. 19).

At the beginning of the study Carl was still enroled in two subjects, Mathematics and Business. He was no longer attending the Biology and Social Studies classes in which he was registered at the start of this school year, having been "terminated" from these two courses due to his many absences and Gilford's attendance policy.

Biology was the first course Carl stopped attending. "I never even went to the class," he declared. "I just dropped out at the start" (Carl 2, p. 3, 124-126). Carl had been enroled in, and failed, the Biology course last year. It was his previous experience in this course, he suggested, that resulted in his avoidance of the course this term. "I took it second semester last year," Carl explained. "So I didn't want to do it first semester this year" (Carl 2, p. 3, 135-138).

To achieve his objective of getting out of Biology,

Carl simply did not attend the course. He knew the attendance policy would eventually terminate his registration in Biology and he would be able to register for it next term if he so desired.

Carl began the school year by attending the classes in Social Studies, a course he had also taken the previous year and failed by two percent, having received a final grade of 48 percent. Soon after beginning the course this year he stopped doing assignments and attending less frequently. "I slacked off," he recounted, "and never did homework and I started failing tests. . . . I'd go like once a week or something like that. So finally he [teacher] said 'forget it' (Carl 2, p. 5, 236-247).

Social Studies was his last course of the day. Even though Carl knew he would be eventually removed from this course due to his absences, he did not want to remain at school for this class. He preferred to miss the last class, go home and eat dinner and return to school for football practice. Once he reached 18 absences in the class, Carl was summoned to the office of one of the school administrators where he was told that he was out of Social Studies (Carl 6, pp. 7-8).

During the study Carl continued to miss classes frequently in one of his two remaining subjects, Mathematics, a course scheduled immediately before and after lunch hour. He seldom missed classes in Business, scheduled first class in the morning. At mid-term Carl had missed 17

classes in Mathematics and 3 classes in Business. For the reporting period August 31 to November 20, Carl had 39 absences and 8 lates in these two subjects (Period Attendance, August 31 to November 20), with most of these absences and lates being in Mathematics (Carl 4, p. 7).

At the end of November, after Carl had missed at least 22 classes in Mathematics, the teacher requested a meeting with Carl and one of the school administrators. After the meeting Carl was still allowed to attend the classes in the course, but he would no longer receive a final grade. He was allowed only to audit the course in preparation for next term when he would have to retake it.

Carl related a conversation he had with the Mathematics teacher regarding the possibility of passing the course, held just prior to the meeting with the school administrator. On this occasion the teacher told Carl that "I would need at least 100% on every test to pass the course" (Carl 4, p.19, 1004-1005). Carl explained that now that he was only auditing the course, the pressure was off. "There would have been more pressure on me to get my mark up higher. Now I don't really have to worry about that. I just pay attention and learn some for next semester" (Carl 4, p. 18, 976-980). Carl's attendance in Mathematics became very infrequent.

School Work and Other Interests

Carl indicated that homework was something he seldom did. Every day after school he would take his gym bag of

school books home and drop it by the back door. "I take books home every day," Carl explained, "but they just sit in my bag" (Carl 4, p. 13, 706-707). In the morning, as he left for school, he would collect the unopened gym bag and take it back to school with him.

Carl indicated that he did not usually find it necessary to do homework. Homework only needed to be done if the assignment was "important" which to Carl was "when you get major marks for handing it in, or if you don't hand it in you could fail, it's so many marks" (Carl 3, p. 5, 246-249). It appeared that such critical assignments rarely occurred. During the three months of interviews, Carl told me that there was only one occasion when he opened his gym bag to do homework (Carl 8, p. 1).

Carl observed that the limited number of courses in which he was enroled for much of the semester and the limited amount of homework that he viewed as requiring completion provided him opportunities to be involved in a number of other activities. Much of this time was devoted to playing hockey and football.

During the autumn Carl missed classes in his courses, but he made the team practices and games. Sometimes, as recounted earlier, he would miss the last class of the day so he could rush home, eat and return to school for the practice. Once winter arrived so did hockey season. During his descriptions of the hockey games in which he played and the events surrounding the games, Carl became enthusiastic

and excited. These games were attended by his father and also, on occasion, his sister (Carl 5, pp. 4-6).

Carl noted that he spent approximately ten hours a week involved in hockey (Carl 3, p. 6). Much of the remainder of his time outside of school was dedicated to part-time employment. The number of hours Carl worked each week in the warehouse section of an appliance and furniture store varied. Typically, though, he worked three evenings during the school week from 5:00 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. and Saturday for six to eight hours, totalling 17.5 to 20 hours a week (Carl 3, p.1; Carl 4, p. 4).

Between November 23 and December 27 the number of hours Carl worked increased to approximately 28 hours each week. He began working six days a week, working for 4.5 hours per day between Monday and Friday and for 6 and 4 hours on Saturday and Sunday respectively (Carl 5, p. 3). Except for Christmas Day, Carl worked every day during the two weeks of Christmas holidays (Carl 6, p. 2). With the money he has earned he plans to purchase a motorcycle like two of his friends have done (Carl 6, p. 2). He noted, however, that he would have to acquire sufficient funds to purchase the motorcycle this semester because, as he explained, "next semester I can't work as much because of school work. I won't have time to" (Carl 5, p. 4, 172-174).

Grades

In an ensuing discussion Carl recollected that last year he had received some grades in the 50 to 60 percent

range. Those marks, he contended, indicated that he had done satisfactorily in his courses. Those grades were all right (Carl 2, p. 1, 50-51). In the Business course, however, receiving a grade of 50% to 60% was not acceptable to Carl. In this class Carl was in competition with two of his friends to see who could acquire the highest grade (Carl 7, p. 9).

The one occasion in which he opened his gym bag and retrieve his homework was to complete the term assignment for the Business course. One night, after arriving home at 11:30 p.m. from a hockey game, he put the final touches on the assignment he had been working on in class. He completed the assignment at 2:00 a.m. the next morning, the same morning it was due (Carl 8, p. 1).

The week before the final examination, Carl said he hoped he would be able to obtain a grade of 70 percent on his Business examination. The exam, he said, "can't be that hard." The examination was comprised of only four questions, and two of the questions were provided in advance (Carl 7, p. 7, 377-378).

Carl and I met the day he wrote the Business exam. He felt he had not done as well as he had hoped. Carl explained that he had studied for the exam. He had, he said, studied "all week. We've had class time and then [I studied] about 15 minutes last night" (Carl 8, p. 7, 373-375). During the Business exam, however, Carl recollected that he remembered only brief excerpts of one of the answers

they were to have been prepared in advance of the exam. "I had the first two lines, that's all I could remember. I remembered some lines and words here and words there and I couldn't fit it together" (Carl 8, p. 7, 358-362). Carl suggested he may have done somewhat better on the remaining questions.

Completing High School

As Carl was completing his first semester registered as a grade eleven student and his third year in high school, he talked about his desire to acquire sufficient credits tc graduate. "Ever since I started high school, they [mother and father] always say, 'try harder,' and stuff like that. I don't know. I never thought school is that important until now." For now, Carl explained, he wanted to graduate from high school. "I want the credits," Carl explained, "so I can get out of there because all my friends are leaving and I don't want to be stuck there when I'm 20. I don't want to look like an idiot when I'm 20 and still in high school" (Carl 2, p. 7, 362-373).

When Carl reflected on his activities during his first two years in high school he became quite upset with himself. "I was pretty stupid for what I did," he stated (Carl 8, p. 2, 91-92). Carl plans to do better next term. Next term he would "pass and get the credits," he predicted, by doing "my homework" (Carl 8, p. 2, 100-105).

Carl elaborated on his belief in the importance of obtaining a secondary school diploma before he leaves high

school. His parents, teachers, and even his friends have portrayed the diploma as providing a shield against poverty. You require a diploma, he observed, "unless you want to be a bum for the rest of your life" (Carl 3, p. 14, 760-761). "If you have a high school diploma," he declared, "you get a better job and make more money and stuff like that" (Carl 3, pp. 14-15, 769-771).

Acquiring the diploma, Carl suggested, guarantees not having to work at McDonald's for the rest of his life (Carl 8, p. 11, 555-556). For Carl, the diploma means a ticket to a better job. It tells the employer, Carl believed, that the applicant is a person who is persistent and finishes something that is started and who is able to read and write (Carl 8, p. 11, 561-574).

School and the Home

Carl noted that since beginning grade one, he had not been very successful in his school courses. "I never got good grades," he recalled. Even during these early grades Carl spent much of his time after school participating in various sports rather than doing school work.

> When I was little, when I started school and stuff up till now . . . right after school I was gone to the rink playing hockey or on the field playing football or baseball or something like that. I never really sat down and set a time every day to do homework. (Carl 5, pp. 13-14, 708-716)

Parental Expectations

Carl received a number of messages from his parents regarding their aspirations for his academic success. Carl

recounted an incident in junior high school when one teacher told his parents that Carl could be an honour student. All it would require, the teacher explained, was for Carl to quit playing hockey and other sports and do school work. Carl continued to play sports (Carl 5, pp. 14-15). Carl believed he could fulfil his parents' expectations for him as long as he passed his courses. "If I did enough to pass," Carl suggested, "and I passed, they'd be happy," and Carl noted, "so that's what I did. I did enough to pass" (Carl 5, p. 14, 746-749).

While Carl indicated that his parents held limited expectations for his academic success, this did not seem to be the case with his sister. Carl noted that the academic success of his sister, who always seemed to find time to do homework and always had higher grades, was more of an interest to his parents (Carl 5, p. 13). The disparity between the academic success of Carl and his sister was perceived by Carl to be what his parents, especially his father, expected of his children. "I know my dad always expected my sister to do better than I did" (Carl 5, p. 14, 729-731).

When Carl's parents did show interest in his schooling and encouraged Carl to discuss the day's events, they seemed to experience difficulties comprehending what Carl was explaining to them. This difficulty appears to have limited their involvement in his schooling.

I'd just say. . . "I did this today in class,"

> and they'd say, "oh, ya." They basically don't really know much about the stuff I'm taking because when they went to high school it was a totally different thing. My dad was telling me when my sister came home in grade two or something like that, he was trying to help her with her math. He couldn't even understand it. (Carl 5, p. 15, 787-797)

Contact Between School and Home

At regular intervals school attendance letters were mailed to students' residences. The letters provided a record of the absences students had in their courses at Gilford. In an attempt to limit this contact between the school and his parents, Carl intercepted most of the letters sent to them. "I didn't even open them," he said. "I knew what they were. I just threw them in the garbage can" (Carl 8, p. 12, 609-611).

Several of the school attendance letters were discovered and read by Carl's mother. She instructed him to attend his classes, but she did not show them to Carl's father because, Carl explained, she thought it would make him angry. On December 15, Carl's father discovered and read a letter that had arrived from the school.

The letter read by Carl's father was not one of the series of attendance letters that had been sent to Carl's residence. This letter, written by one of the school administrators to the parents of several students who had been experienced difficulties this semester, requested that they meet before second semester courses had been selected. "I got it on a Friday," Carl explained. "After work I came

home . . . and was getting changed to go out and my dad hands me the letter and says, 'read this.' He didn't say anything else" (Carl 6, p. 4, 189-195).

The next week Carl and his father, who had not been in a school for years, went to Gilford to attend a meeting with the administrator. Carl feared that his father would be told that he was a bad student and would have to leave the school, but much to Carl's relief, this did not occur. Instead, his father was told that Carl was not a bad student and he didn't cause trouble, but he had to try harder next semester. The three of them, Carl, his father, and the school administrator then planned Carl's courses for second semester (Carl 5, pp. 1-2).

Carl recalled that his father was concerned about Carl skipping classes. His father had revealed that he too had "played hooky" from school. "My dad admits that when he was in school . . . he'd skip lots with his friends and go play pool all day." As Carl recounted the story he noted that his father did not want him to do the same thing. "He doesn't want me to do that. He's got his education," Carl said. He wanted Carl to also complete high school, Carl suggested, "so I can get a job and not be a bum my whole life" (Carl 5, p. 17, 891-899).

Now that Carl's parents are aware of his activities in school this semester, he does not believe that he will be able to get away with similar behaviours during the second semester. He explained that he will no longer skip a class

and tell his parents that he doesn't have a class or tell his parents that he does not have any homework. His parents have told him that he will have to work harder and will now have to do thirty minutes of homework every night (Carl 5, p. 16). Carl declared that "I thought I had better things to do." Carl submitted that it would be very different next semester. "I wouldn't do it again," he stated. "I'd be in class" (Carl 8, p. 13, 675-688).

Future Plans

Soon after Carl's father received the letter from the school requesting that he and Carl meet with one of the school administrators, a discussion between father and son ensued regarding Carl's future in high school and whether he should continue with his schooling or instead acquire full-time employment. At the end of the discussion Carl's father gave him an ultimatum. "My dad said starting next semester if I miss one class without him knowing, 'forget it.' I have to get a job" (Carl 7, p. 15, 792-795).

Carl saw some benefits in having a job rather than attending school. "If I went to work for a year," he suggested, "I'd have to do the job," but he noted that he would not have to worry about all the things that need to be done for school. "You know," he asserted, "I wouldn't have to have this done or this done or this done" (Carl 8, p. 4, 211-217).

In spite of this belief that he would have fewer worries if he left school and the threat from his father

that he would send him to work, leaving school prior to graduation was not an option. "Even if I wanted to," he declared, "they [parents] wouldn't let me drop out before I graduated." Carl explained that his parents, especially his father, viewed the high school diploma as being critical for acquiring a job. "He [father] knows I can't get a good job without at least a high school diploma" (Carl 5, p. 3, 111-119).

Carl explained that he wanted to graduate from high school and, afterwards, go into business for himself. "I wouldn't mind opening up my own business or something like that," Carl declared. "I'm not sure what yet, but I don't want some guy telling me what to do all day" (Carl 2, p. 8, 391-395).

Carl noted that the business course at school had been helpful in providing him with some information about developing a business, but he was uncertain where he would further his education in this area after completing high school. He did not think he could cope with the number of years that would be required to attend post-secondary institutions. "I don't know if I'd want to do it again [attend school] for another six years in university or whatever" (Carl 8, p. 4, 179-182). Carl did suggest that he would consider taking a single course offered at a vocational college, but only "after taking at least a year off first" (Carl 8, p. 4, 193-194).

The Day-to-Day Experiences in High School

While Carl perceived the high school diploma to be valuable, he found the subject matter of most of the courses to be mostly irrelevant to his needs. He viewed Business class, however, where he missed few classes, as providing him with a basic understanding of the world of commerce. This, he saw as being useful to him in realizing his dream to open a business. In Math class, where he had recently been taught graphing, he could see no connection between this course and his future aspirations. "Well, I guess you have to learn how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide, but some of the other stuff I don't think I'll ever use again" (Carl 2, p. 8, 427-431).

Carl viewed the Math course and most of the other courses in which he was enroled as being primarily designed for those students who were going on to university. "If you're going to be a physicist or something like that, it teaches you stuff you need to know" (Carl 2, p. 12, 657-659). Carl, however, did not plan to enrol in university.

While Carl saw little value in the subject matter of most of his courses, he did believe that school offered something of value. "I don't think it's really the courses," Carl suggested. Instead he proposed that school can provide you with a safe learning environment in which to develop life skills so you know "how to manage your life," and "how not to screw up your life" (Carl 2, p. 12, 623-633).

Carl viewed school as the institution that will provide him with the skills necessary to have a successful future. What he learns in school, Carl proposed, would make it possible for him to get a job. School, he hoped, would "teach me something so I can work, make some money, and have a good life" (Carl 2, p. 12, 615-618).

Relationships With Teachers

Carl noted that in the small-sized junior high school he attended the teachers knew the students who attended the school. It was this lack of anonymity, he explained, that prevented students from skipping. In recounting his experiences in this school, Carl remarked that "all the teachers know who you are . . . . You can't really skip." In this school, he suggested, "they see you walking down the hallway and you have their class next and you're not there. They know something's wrong" (Carl 4, p. 11, 564-575).

Carl explained that in the high school, with the greater number of students, it is easier to miss classes. However, Carl revealed that because he was already known to his teachers next semester, because they had taught him before, he would have to be more diligent in attending class and doing his school work. "You can't really sluff off," he declared, " because then they'll know that you are" (Carl 5, p. 12, 614-616).

Carl recalled a number of the teachers he had encountered recently. He indicated that he found all of his teachers to be generally helpful. When you approach them,

he remarked, "they won't turn you away" (Carl 2, p. 18, 949-950). He noted that he hasn't "really had a teacher I really hate" (Carl 8, p. 5, 263-264).

Only some of his teachers, though, were ones he said he liked. In describing these teachers, Carl said he liked the teachers who "joke around with you" (Carl 2, p. 17, 885-886) and those teachers who were "laid back" and don't get "mad at the students." One such teacher, he recalled, would "talk to them [students]. He doesn't scream at them" (Carl 8, p. 6, 282-284). Carl also appreciated that this same teacher took the time to clarify the assignments about which Carl felt uncertain and that this teacher checked the assignments to ensure that the work was done (Carl 3, p. 10).

Teacher Expectations

To varying degrees the practices of the teachers Carl encountered were similar to those encountered by the other participants in this study: keep the students seated at their desks doing the assignments or attending to the teachers and have the students refrain from talking to one another. Exclamations such as "sit down and be quiet" were suggested by Carl as often being the teachers' responses when observing students who failed to meet these expectations (Carl 3, p. 20, 1094). The good student, Carl observed, besides receiving high grades, did not talk in class (Carl 3, p. 20, 1069-1071).

Carl indicated that he found it tedious to sit in class

all day. "It's the same old thing. You sit there, the teacher talks and you have to sit there and listen and do the work" (Carl 3, pp. 2-3, 109-111). Carl discovered that these expected in-school behaviours were some of the things you had to accept in high school. "You just got used to it," Carl advised. "It's something you have to do. So you do it" (Carl 3, p. 14, 752-754).

Attendance

Carl estimated that he had missed 18 classes in one subject before he was removed from that class. As has already been reported, he had missed 17 classes in Math by midterm (report period ending October 30) and for the reporting period August 31 to November 20 Carl had accumulated 39 absences and 8 lates in his two subjects, most of them in Math. Yet, Carl did not recollect being assigned one study hall during this semester. He was not removed from Math until the end of November. All Carl noted about these situations was that "it's kind of weird" (Carl 4, p. 8, 406). He offered no other reason for what had occurred.

Relationships With Other Students

In both classes Carl chose to sit at a desk near friends. In these classes Carl and his friends would typically divide their time between attending to the particular assignments, conversing with one another and simply sitting quietly apparently doing nothing (fieldnotes, January 21, 1993). As Carl suggested, when we began to

discuss these observed in-class behaviours of students, "everybody has got to find a different way to deal with stuff" (Carl 8, p. 18, 940-942).

Carl described Social Studies, one of the courses Carl seldom attended at the beginning of the first semester, as being "boring." He had no friends in the course this year. He noted, however, that when he took the course last year and he had friends in the classes, he had a different impression of the course and he did not skip the classes.

> It was okay last year because I had a lot of friends in it last year. But this year there were no people that I knew in there. So I guess if I have friends in the classroom it makes it a lot more interesting to do the work and stuff like that. (Carl 2, p. 6, 278-284)

Other than in the classrooms of the courses he was taking, Carl would, on occasion, meet with his school friends in the cafeteria while awaiting the start of the next class, but as the number of courses Carl was taking decreased, these opportunities also became less frequent (Carl 3 pp. 8-9; Carl 5, p. 18). Carl would now come to school for the particular course and, rather than remain at school and wait for next class, he would go home (Carl 5, p. 18). Most of Carl's contact with other students was in the classrooms of the courses in which he was still enroled.

Conclusion

In early July I telephoned Carl at his home to arrange an opportunity for us to meet to discuss the story that was soon to be completed. I had not spoken to Carl since

January 22, 1993. He told me he had a very successful second semester having passed all his courses.

SUMMARY

The stories of three at risk students -- Amanda, Karen, and Carl -- represent the first level of findings of this study. These students experienced the year in somewhat different ways, but the findings indicate that they also shared some similar experiences. The next chapter will explore further the meanings imbedded in the stories.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The overall purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of students identified as being at risk of dropping out of an urban high school. The discussion that follows presents the second level of findings, the focus of which is on key aspects of the participants' experiences in response to the three specific interview questions: (a) can you describe your current and recent school experiences; (b) what was school like in previous years; and (c) can you describe what you think your future schooling will be like. The discussion that follows is organized into three sections: (a) coming to high school; (b) the fall semester of grade eleven; and (c) daily life in the classroom.

Coming to High School

In discussions, spanning four months of the first semester of grade eleven, participants made numerous references to the obstacles and challenges they encountered when they entered high school. They spoke of what they had not learned and what they had learned in earlier grades.

Unprepared for the Demands of High School

The three participants indicated their present difficulties in school were, to some degree, the result of early school experiences. They attributed some of the difficulties faced in high school to inadequate preparation

in previous years.

On one occasion, in an unusually emotional reaction, Karen commented on this connection between the difficulties she presently experienced in her courses and elementary school. She noted, as did Amanda, that an inadequate development of literacy skills caused much pain for her in later schooling. Because of what occurred in elementary school, Karen explained, "I cannot write. I cannot express myself. I cannot read. . . . Like, I mean people always laugh at me" (Karen 3, p. 22, 1165-1169).

Karen had been an honour student in Math in junior high school and received "good" grades. However, she began to experience difficulties in her school subjects in grade ten. She began to receive low and failing marks for her assignments. It was not long before Karen began to spend considerable time skipping classes with several of her friends.

Amanda, who encountered similar difficulties as early as grade one, began to avoid completing assignments where her weaknesses would become evident. Eventually her coping strategies expanded to include avoiding the setting where such experiences occurred and she began to stay home rather than attend school.

Both Karen and Amanda commented that the courses in junior high school had not prepared them adequately for grade ten. They noted that they did not feel the previous school year had prepared them for either the content that

would be encountered in the grade ten courses or the expectations of their high school teachers. For Amanda the need to enrol in a high school rather than remain in a junior high school with younger students meant that she went from a grade nine class, where she had finally experienced limited academic success, to a regular grade ten program for which she was not prepared.

Carl, as with Amanda, had received frequent messages that he would never do very well in school. As a result Carl had come to believe he was only expected to pass his courses, not receive "good" grades in them.

During junior high school Carl seldom studied and he completed few homework assignments. As a result once he entered high school Carl found that he was unprepared for the level of work required even to pass the courses. He did not have the study or homework skills necessary for high school, nor did he have the self confidence to believe he could succeed.

School Size: A Sense of Safety and Belonging

The three participants resided closer to other high schools than to Gilford, but each believed that attending this particular high school would serve as a means of averting many of the hazards associated with the more conveniently located but larger high schools. Two of the participants, Karen and Carl, indicated the size of Gilford was an important reason for choosing to attend that school. Both indicated that the violence witnessed by friends at

other neighbouring high schools was not evident at Gilford. As Carl noted on one occasion, "We don't have any bullies or anything. No one to be really scared of" (Carl 6, p. 17, 867-894). Karen echoed Carl's comments: "I feel more comfortable in a smaller school" (Karen 2, p. 2, 106-108).

They suggested that at other high schools some students would form gangs based on membership in particular sports teams or ethnic or racial backgrounds. Karen explained that friends attending these schools were afraid of being assaulted by members of these gangs. At Gilford, however, such gangs were not encountered.

The scale of Gilford appeared to limit violence at this school, in part by making it difficult for cliques to form. The scale of this school also acted in ways to control student behaviour by creating more opportunities for school staff to become familiar with the students of the school. As Carl indicated, when teachers knew who you were, it was very difficult to engage in inappropriate behaviour.

The small scale of the school provided more opportunities for students to remain with friends throughout the school day. For example, the relatively small number of students limited the number of sections of any course that was available. This provided more occasions for students to remain in classes with friends, a circumstance that is much less likely to occur at other larger schools. As a result students such as Carl, anxious about attending high school for the first time, could maintain the support of friends in

the various classroom settings they encountered.

The size of this school did reduce the anonymity and improve the quality of the relations among students and between educators, a phenomenon noted by Stockard and Mayberry (1985), Goodlad (1984) and Wehlage et al. (1989). But the very thing Karen and Carl found so appealing about Gilford, the size of the school and the sense of closeness to others at the school, may be what made it so difficult for Amanda to remain.

Gump (1980) wrote of "undermanning" as circumstances in which students' more central positions in smaller schools increased their levels of participation as they received more invitations to become involved in school activities. In Amanda's case, increased visibility made it more difficult for her to hide her weaknesses in reading and writing. With the limited number of available sections of a course, it was probable that some of her friends would attend classes in which she was enroled. And it was likely that she would encounter the same teacher for several courses.

Because of the size of the school and the close proximity of Amanda's locker to those of her friends, most of her friends were aware of the insult written on her locker. The sense of humiliation and betrayal she experienced as a result of this incident made it difficult for her to return to Gilford where she knew she would continue to encounter these same people.

The Fall Semester of Grade Eleven

This school year proved to be challenging for Karen, Amanda and Carl. Throughout the conduct of the study we had numerous conversations relating to their experiences during the beginning of the first semester of grade eleven. These conversations occurred at a time when the participants were frequently missing many classes and potentially at risk of leaving school or being "terminated" from all of their classes and by the administration.

Disengagement From School

During this first semester of grade eleven each of the participants had disengaged from school to some degree. During the first six weeks, or one-third of the first semester -- August 31 to October 9 -- Karen had been absent from 41 classes. The record of attendance indicated that by the end of the first semester, Karen had accumulated 74 absences and remained in three courses.

During the first six weeks Carl had been absent from 32 classes and by the end of the semester he had missed a total of 42 classes. He remained in one course by the end of the semester.

Amanda continued to miss approximately one class each day, missing 31 classes from August 31 to October 9 and a total of 51 classes until November 6. On November 16, less than two weeks before she left Gilford, Amanda was "terminated" from two of her courses.

For Karen and Carl the greatest number of absences

occurred during the first six weeks of classes. Karen offered two reasons why this may have occurred. One reason was that the transition from summer holidays to school was sometimes not an easy process and once a few classes had been missed it was easier to continue to be absent than to return to class and face the reactions of the teachers to your return. Thus, a "cycle of skipping" would begin.

Another reason offered by Karen, and one that appears to be equally supported by Carl, is that at the beginning of the school year, students would miss a great number of classes in those courses they did not like or they found "boring." This could mean that they did not like the teacher, the content of the course, the approach to instruction, or the lack of "voice" or control. It could also mean that they did not have any friends in the class, that the course had been scheduled too early or too late in the day, or they were too tired from the activities of the night before. Eventually the "termination" policy at Gilford would take effect. The decision to "drop" a course would be made for them and they would be removed from the course.

After the first six weeks of classes Carl had been removed from the two courses he did not wish to attend. Yet in the Business course, a subject Carl did enjoy and which he believed to be important for his future plans, he had missed only three classes by midterm and few additional classes by the end of the semester.

Karen had also been able to delete a course in this manner. Such an approach, that is missing classes until the "termination" policy is enacted, appears to have been an expedient way for students to delete courses at Gilford. It was also the only approach that would not result in the school administrator replacing the deleted course with another one.

As a result of her many absences, Amanda was removed from two courses several weeks before she left Gilford. Her plan to complete high school was dependent on remaining in these courses, but she had frequent conflicts with the teacher who taught two of these courses. She was also receiving failing grades in these same two courses. Being "terminated" from these courses destroyed Amanda's plan to complete high school, but it presented a way for her to avoid an uncomfortable situation.

Academic Achievement and Other Interests

In a recent newspaper article Michael Valpy (1993) recounted statements made by high school students regarding their views on, among other things, school success. One of these students, a seventeen year old named Stephanie Hazen, noted that one of the messages she has received is that school "is not about learning, it's about getting good marks" (pp. D1-5). What happens when some students do not get even this message?

Academic success was perceived by the participants as having been achieved whenever a passing grade, as opposed to

a failing one, was achieved in a course. What was relevant for these students was passing each course and thus moving closer to the completion of high school and acquiring the secondary school graduation diploma viewed as the "ticket" to a happy and successful future. Except for the occasion when Carl was in competition with a fellow student for the higher grade in Business class and when Karen, desiring to demonstrate, once again, her capabilities in Mathematics, endeavoured to achieve grades in the 70s, or 80s, or higher, anything beyond a passing grade was described as unnecessarily time consuming.

Karen, who considered attending university after graduation, realized she would have to acquire higher grades in her courses. She noted, however, that the effort required to receive such grades could wait until grade twelve when it was important to acquire good grades. For now, Karen explained, "fifty [percent] would suit me fine" (Karen 7, p. 11, 554). Grade eleven courses, she explained, were "low classes" and not very important. Grade twelve courses, in her view, were the important ones for getting into university (Karen 7, p. 12). She noted that she would take these courses twice if it was necessary to acquire higher grades in order to enter university.

There appeared to be little motivation on the part of the participants to do more than was necessary to achieve grades that would just get them through the courses. Reducing their course load seemed to be a practice used to

avoid courses or teachers they did not like. By planning to take more than three years to complete high school, there was time for involvement in a variety of other activities.

Such behaviours and beliefs meant there was ample time to be involved in other activities. Karen and Carl participated in various teams, including both school and nonschool teams. Karen and Carl, and in previous years Amanda, had part-time after-school employment. During the study Karen and Carl each worked between 20 and 30 hours a week.

While part-time employment is necessary, in some instances, for youth to assist families pay household bills, this does not appear to be the case for Carl or Karen. Both students intended to use the money they earned to purchase recreational vehicles and, in Karen's case, her parents agreed to pay half the cost of the Jeep.

If students did not spend these hours after school engaged in part-time employment, would they have been more involved in their academic pursuits? Would they have done better in school if they did not have these jobs? A study published in Developmental Psychology (March, 1991) and cited by Rincover (1993) concluded that there was a correlation between after-school employment and homework completion and academic achievement.

However, based on the participants' earlier comments regarding the value of the courses in grade eleven, I am not certain they would have done more school work if they did

not retain part-time after-school employment. There is no indication they would have made a greater effort to remain in all of their courses and, assuming they passed these courses, complete high school in three, instead of four or more years.

It appears more likely that they would discover other means of avoiding school work such as spending more time involved in hockey, football, basketball, volleyball, or other situations that allow them to socialize with peers.

Future Plans

Karen had a tentative plan for a career in nursing. This ambition developed after witnessing her friend experience childbirth and then discussing her idea with two other acquaintances. Carl wanted to own a small business so he would not have to listen to orders from a boss. Amanda, who did not yet have plans for a career, indicated that such decisions could wait until after she had completed high school.

Each of the participants indicated that their future career plans may include attending university or college after completing high school. This was especially true for Karen, though she and the other participants had little information about courses and requirements at post secondary institutions.

Discussions with the participants in response to the third question, requesting that they consider future schooling, indicated the limited range and scope of their

future plans. As with high school graduates who participated in previous research (Downie, 1991), career paths seem to be limited to the encounters these youth have with only a few persons, especially parents, relatives or close friends.

Based on stories from parents, teachers and peers each of the participants believed the message that the secondary school graduation diploma was the "ticket" to a happy and successful life. For them, it was the diploma, not the acquired knowledge indicated by such a document, that was perceived to be important. Doing anything beyond what was necessary to receive a passing grade in a course was unnecessary. Engaging in homework or studying after class time was unnecessary. Courses that were uninteresting or too difficult could be dropped and replaced at a later time. Taking two or three courses a semester and thus requiring an extra year to complete high school was seen as acceptable practice.

One cannot help but wonder what effect such experiences and beliefs will have on the future activities of these participants. What will happen when their beliefs about work and success encounter the expectations of post secondary institutions and the workforce? What will occur if their level of performance in school is replicated in the workforce? Why did their attitudes towards these jobs seem much more positive than their attitudes towards school?

School and the Home

By the time the participants had entered high school, their parents had very limited involvement in their children's education. For instance Amanda had learned at an early age that her parents would be generally uninvolved in her schooling. By grade eleven this lack of involvement was diminished further as Amanda, who was eighteen years of age, had left home. Any information about her schooling was confined to those occasions when she chose to communicate with them and limited to what she chose to reveal to them. An illustration of this is that it was a full month before Amanda chose to tell her father that she was no longer attending school.

Karen and Carl explained that they were also able to restrict the information their parents received about their schooling. Intercepting attendance letters from mailboxes and simply not talking about school were approaches taken by these individuals to limit what their parents knew about their activities at school. While youth may want the support and approval of adults (Wehlage, 1989), as they enter the highly stressful teenage years and high school they appear to turn increasingly to peers for recognition and support (The Canadian Psychiatric Association, cited in the Edmonton Journal, October 7, 1993, p. A14).

Even though Karen and Carl lived with their parents (although for several weeks Karen did not) it was clear that the involvement of parents in their children's education was

also restricted. Another reason for this limitation was that parents seemed uncertain of what assistance or advice they could or should offer their children regarding schooling.

Carl explained that his parents no longer comprehended what he was studying in school and as a result of previous experiences attempting to assist Carl's older sister with her homework, his father had come to feel unable to assist his children with school work. Karen's parents, perhaps afraid that she would again leave home if she felt they were harassing her, seemed willing to provide only subtle suggestions to her, such as when they indicated that she may not be able to keep up with her many extracurricular activities.

Upon receipt of a letter from an administrator at Gilford, Carl's parents suddenly became involved in their son's schooling. The letter indicated Carl was experiencing difficulties in school and requested that his parents meet with the administrator to discuss Carl's future at Gilford and, more specifically, his timetable for the second semester.

Carl's father, who previously appeared to be more concerned with his son's hockey games, became actively involved with the school and his son's education. The request for this meeting with the school administrator not only made him aware of how he could be of assistance, but it also indicated a role he could play.

Carl spent most of his evenings after school involved in various sports or working at his part-time job. What he had done in school, he believed, was not very important to others. As long as he continued to proceed through the grades and eventually received a secondary school graduation diploma he felt his parents would be content. As Carl noted, "If I did enough to pass and I passed, they'd be happy. So that's what I did. I did enough to pass" (Carl 5, p. 14, 746-749).

After the meeting with the school administrator and a further discussion with his parents he proceeded to miss few classes. He dropped only one of his courses during the second semester and he received passing grades in the others.

While, by grade eleven, Karen's, Amanda's and Carl's parents had limited involvement in their children's schooling, it was important for these youth to believe that their parents were still interested and concerned about their schooling. As Amanda stated, parental support is important. "They [youth] need the person [parent] to be home after school to say, 'How was school?'. . . I think children are a lot stronger if they have that support" (Amanda 8, pp. 2-3, 86-130).

Daily Life in the Classroom

The Economic Council of Canada (1992) indicated that businesses are now demanding high school graduates who are able to think critically and work in teams. Yet the

students I observed in the classrooms of Gilford appear to be taught skills very different from those recommended for the workplace of today.

A Posture of Passivity

From my observations in the classes attended by the participants I concluded that the teachers devoted considerable energy toward efforts to restrain students, to keep them seated in their desks, working on their own in isolation from other students. Teachers appeared to be continually attempting to maintain this "posture of passivity" (Kohn, 1993) in spite of continuing attempts by the students to engage in social exchanges with one another.

Overhead projectors displaying notes students were expected to rewrite in their notebooks, televised dramatizations of books assigned to be read previously in the course, instructions or lectures by the teachers, and assignments to be completed by students in the classes all encouraged the students to sit passively at their desks. "Good" students came to be recognized, at least by some students, as the ones who worked independently and did not talk to others in the class.

Such domination by teachers and the "silencing" of students (Fine, 1991) was observed by Goodlad (1984) during his study of schools in the early 1980's. He noted that the primary student activities in classrooms were "marked by passivity -- written work, listening, and preparing for assignments -- dominate in the likelihood of their occurring

at any given time" (p. 105). He also noted that the activities of teachers, most frequently observed and reported, included explaining and lecturing and substantial amounts of time "observing students at work or monitoring their seat work" (p. 105). These descriptions, although presented a decade ago, still seem to apply at Gilford.

The three participants discussed the repetitive nature of the tasks they performed in classes and their passive roles as learners. Karen noted that in one of her classes "all you do is write essays or you read something. You read a story, then write an essay, read a story, answer questions. It's the same thing all the time" (Karen 6, p. 7, 354-358). Similarly, Carl and Amanda, while discussing their day-to-day experiences in high school, indicated that in their classes "you just sit there and listen" (Amanda 3, p. 21, 1142-1143). "It's the same old thing," Carl stated. You sit there, the teacher talks and you have to sit there and listen and do the work" (Carl 3, pp. 2-3, 109-111). Utilizing such strategies of "defensive teaching" to control student behaviour, McNeil (1988) contended, results in a "ritual of teaching and learning," where "students disengage from enthusiastic involvement in the learning process" (p. xviii).

Inconsistent Enforcement of Rules and Policies

The students at Gilford encounter, as do students at most schools, many policies, rules, and protocols designed to manage their behaviours. Yet the application was

inconsistent and erratic. Two strategies discussed repeatedly by the participants were the assigning of study hall and the "termination" policy.

Each of the participants remained in courses after reaching ten absences, the number at which "termination" from the particular course was to occur. Yet each of them also found themselves removed from courses due to the enforcement of the same policy.

Study hall was to be assigned for a variety of infractions such as arriving late to class or failing to complete homework assignments. Yet the participants, who seldom completed homework and frequently arrived late for class, received very few if any such consequences.

Such inconsistencies by staff members regarding the enforcement of these policies were observed by the participants. Amanda determined that some teachers were more lenient than others. As she noted, "You can be late for certain teachers and some teachers you can't be." For some teachers, she indicated, "If you come a half-hour late, oh well" (Amanda 6, p. 7, 344-348).

Amanda and Karen also suggested that those teachers who "bent the rules" liked the particular students. Carl, less certain about why such inconsistencies would occur, simply noted that "it's kind of weird" (Carl 4, p. 8, 406).

While these students did not have a clear understanding of why such inconsistencies occurred, they did note that they sometimes found disconcerting teachers "being nice" in

these ways. The result was a lack of structure and inconsistent and ambivalent expectations.

The Prevalence of the Social Aspects of School

Goodlad (1984, p. 61) noted that for society, generally, the primary function of schools is seen as the teaching of academics. Yet, for Amanda, Karen and Carl, what appeared to be of primary interest was the social world of school, something Goodlad suggests should come as no surprise. He noted that approximately twenty-five years ago C. W. Gordon "documented the dominance of high school social life" (cited in Goodlad, p. 75). What did come as a surprise in the data Goodlad collected was the "apparent intensity of these nonacademic interests" (p. 75).

The students from Gilford who participated in this study and a majority of the other students in their classes did seem preoccupied with the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. During the few minutes between classes, I observed hurried exchanges between students as they congregated beside their lockers acquiring materials for their upcoming classes. Once in the classrooms the students would often regroup and continue to converse in spite of attempts by the teachers to restrain such behaviours.

The Need to Belong

The need to be accepted and feel that they belonged was so important for some students they appeared to sabotage their potential for success, deliberately, in an attempt to

be accepted by peers. Membership or "being cool," Karen revealed, meant you needed to get low marks and skip classes. Karen explained that she had come to believe this was a requirement for acceptance by her peers, and she ominously predicted that her younger brother, who was now in junior high school, would also soon bow to these pressures.

School sports appear to have been an important aspect of life at school for two of the participants. Karen returned to Gilford when the school team on which she desired to play was being organized and preparing for the upcoming season. Carl was also a member of one of the school teams. The team on which he played began training at the beginning of the school year. Carl maintained his membership on the school team, attending practices and games, although he continued to miss classes.

For these two individuals being members of school teams was very important. For Karen the team may have been one of the draws to return to school. Being members of school teams, however, did not guarantee that the students would attend their classes. Both Karen and Carl continued to miss classes while they were on the teams. There did not seem to be any attempt by school personnel to link team membership to school attendance.

Amanda was not a member of a school team. She did not have friends in school encouraging her to attend as did Karen. In fact, one of the few friends Amanda believed she did have at the school humiliated her in front of her peers.

There did not seem to be much Amanda experienced that would support feelings of connection or membership to Gilford and as the semester progressed there seemed to be more and more events that further weakened these already tenuous attachments to the school, thus enhancing her sense of alienation from others at Gilford.

This need to connect with other individuals at school does not appear to include only other students. The participants also indicated that there was a need to develop positive personal relationships with the teachers and administrators of the school, or as Carl indicated, a need to feel that they knew who you were and cared about what you did and how they related to you.

Karen recounted two stories illustrating the importance of the relationship between student and teacher and the effect such relationships can have on a student's success at school. In one case a teacher who was sensitive to the personal problems one of Karen's friends was facing was able to get her to return to school in spite of a previous pattern of skipping classes and the school's "termination" policy. In a very different situation, where a teacher and a student did not connect, the student began to avoid classes in the course, eventually resulting in her termination from the course where she had previously been receiving very high grades.

This personal connection between student and teacher, where the teacher's concerns were seen to go beyond academic

matters, appears to have been of critical importance for students experiencing difficulties in their personal lives. It appears important that schools help foster such connections. It is also necessary to understand, however, that some students will resist any such connection.

Seeking Relevance in the Classroom

In many of the schools that were studied by Goodlad (1984) the following was observed:

> what students saw as primary concerns in their daily lives, teachers viewed as dissonance in conducting school and classroom business . . . . And our students, meanwhile, appeared not to be quite connecting with the learning they presumably were there to pursue. (Goodlad, 1984, p. 80)

Such explanations of student behaviour may suggest to some individuals that this limited connection with academic activities offered in the classrooms is the result of youth failing to move beyond the social world at school and enter the academic one. This implies that if one could get these students to break free of their captivation with personal and social concerns, they would embrace the learning they were there to pursue.

While Carl indicated that school offered a safe environment in which to develop skills necessary for future employment and to successfully navigate through life's challenges, he suggested that much of what he was taking in his courses had little relevance to his life or future aspirations. He did believe some of the courses would be valuable for students planning to enter university. "If

you're going to be a physicist or something like that," he observed, "it teaches you stuff you need to know" (Carl 2, p. 12, 657-659).

While Karen did indicate that some of the courses would be relevant for her future plans to be a nurse, it was only the grade twelve courses she viewed in this manner. Amanda also noted that school had little relevance for some students and suggested that another reason is because some students lack direction and have unclear goals.

Conclusion

A complex array of factors appear to influence each student's decision to drop out or remain in school. If one considered in-school behaviours, each of the participants in this study could be considered at risk of dropping out of school. Each of the participants typically received low grades, missed classes and quit courses. Yet, when asked why they engaged in such behaviours, they could provide only limited explanations, blaming factors outside of their own control.

These findings raise several questions. Why were the participants so detached from taking responsibility of their own behaviours? What is there about school that seems to be so fundamentally alienating to these adolescents? Are the present ways we organize schools bound to create such behaviours?

CHAPTER V

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to offer conclusions which relate to the overall purpose of the study. In this chapter, I extend the findings discussed in the previous chapters, relating them to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. I also offer recommendations for practice and further research. I begin, however, with reflections on the approach to research utilized in this study.

Methodology

The intent of this study was to contribute to the understanding of "at risk" students. More specifically, the study examined the perceptions that such students have of school, and the meaning that school experiences hold for them. The research was guided by three primary questions: (a) how would students describe their current and recent school experiences; (b) how would these same students describe their school experiences of previous years; and (c) what future schooling might these students take. Most previous studies of "at risk" youth have utilized, as participants, youth who were currently out of school or who had left school previously. While this simplifies the identification of the "at risk" population from which to draw participants, studies for which participants have been thus selected share a limitation. They are based on the often distant memories of the participants which may result

in descriptions of their school experiences being limited to a few distinct memories or influenced by attempts to reduce the dissonance between one's previous actions and present beliefs about leaving school.

In this study, the youth who participated were at risk of leaving school, but they currently attended classes. My purpose in choosing this approach was to examine the experiences of these youth as they were in the process of deciding whether they would leave school. Such an approach, done in "real time," that is as students were experiencing these events, was able to provide an in-depth, holistic view of being "at risk."

Such studies have a considerable potential for uncovering the interactions between those factors that eventually lead to school leaving. Yet, while there are a number of strengths in these real time studies, there are also several issues particular to this methodology.

Gaining access to classrooms and other areas of the school in order to conduct observations was problematic. It was important that the researcher was not perceived as a "stooge" for the school administration, teachers, guidance counsellors, or parents.

The researcher had to develop a relationship in which the participants would be willing to reflect upon and share both pleasant and unpleasant experiences and be willing to discuss sensitive issues relating to school staff, parents, friends, and themselves. It was necessary to preserve

confidentiality and anonymity while encountering intense curiosity about the participants and the initial findings by some staff members.

The development and maintenance of a relationship of trust between researcher and participants is a critical component of research of this nature. The development of these relationships relied on participants sensing a genuine interest on the part of the researcher as they recounted their experiences. The formation of these connections between researcher and participants required opportunities for the participants to recount these experiences without criticism. It also meant providing opportunities for participants to ensure the accuracy of the interview data and the interpretations of those data.

While the development of trusting relationships proved to be a challenge, it was also an extremely positive aspect of the research methodology. Of course, there were other positive and some negative aspects as well

Positive and Negative Aspects of the Methodology

A very positive aspect of the methodology pertains to the "richness" of the data collected about participants' experiences. This occurred because the study was conducted in "real time," that is, as the participants were experiencing the particular events in their lives.

The involvement of participants in the development of the stories and repeated interviews provided opportunities to clarify confusing or misconstrued aspects of the emerging

accounts and to clarify details of earlier accounts and enhance the richness of these stories.

The participants also benefited from this approach as they felt that the interviews gave them opportunities to tell their stories and to have them heard by an adult audience. While the effects of encountering a caring adult are documented (Nodding, 1988; Wehlage, et al., 1989) this study did not attempt to discern such effects.

Even though there was much that was positive about the methodology, there were some negative aspects. One related to the difficulty maintaining an organized research schedule and the need to have a plan flexible enough to change an interview to a time later that day or later that week. Interviews needed to be arranged according to the plans of the participants, plans which seemed never to be developed beyond a few days. Interviews arranged a week in advance did not always result in the arrival of the particular participant. The researcher had to be sensitive to the events in the participants' lives and be prepared to reschedule the interview or alter the intended focus of the interview questions.

A second "negative aspect" was manifested as an obstacle to my attempts to make observations in the classes attended by the participants. It seemed necessary to become an accepted addition to the classes that were observed. It was necessary, therefore, to attend the same classes as frequently as was possible, yet conflicting class schedules

and there being only one researcher, served to reduce the number of opportunities for such observations.

For example, the Mathematics course attended by Karen and Carl occurred at the same time as one of Amanda's courses. The decision to attend the Mathematics class meant that during those occasions, observations did not take place in the course attended by Amanda.

An additional challenge arising from such an approach to research is that the collection and analysis of the data can be very time consuming. Large quantities of data were collected through interviews and observations. Personal journal entries were also maintained by the researcher throughout this investigation. Bringing order and meaning to this mass of data began as the data were being collected and continued for more than a year after the data had been collected.

While there were both positive and negative aspects to the choice of this approach to research, I believe that this particular methodology provided the opportunity to engage in an in-depth study of what it means to be at risk and, thus, to better understand the process of leaving school. Through the chosen approach, it was possible to examine the multiplicity of the events, and interconnectedness of the events that affect these students.

A Further Discussion of the Findings

The purpose of this section is to extend the findings presented in the preceding two chapters. This discussion

focuses on the family and high school life.

Families

The measure most frequently used to identify those students most likely to be at risk of leaving school prior to graduation has been their personal and family backgrounds, characteristics which have been reported as being most closely associated to school leaving (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). The Canadian Council on Social Development (1989) also noted that children from poor families possessing, among other characteristics, low income and education levels have a greater tendency to leave school prior to completion.

Many of the in-school behaviours exhibited by the participants of this study are similar to those identified with students at risk of leaving school. But the background characteristics of these youth would, at first glance, not indicate that they were at risk. Two of the parents had post-secondary degrees, one in law and one in education. Amanda was the only one of the three participants whose parents had separated, though she did not live with either parent. The participants did not appear to come from minority or economically distressed families.

It was, however, evident that the "structural" and "functional" weaknesses discussed by Coleman and Hoffer (1987) existed in these families. The parents appeared to have little involvement in the schooling of their children. The participants suggested that their parents had limited

opportunity and understanding of the roles they could or should play.

The gradual movement of children towards acquiring greater independence can be observed in relation to what children do and ways they behave. One such change appears to manifest itself in the increasing reluctance of children to have their parents involved in their schooling. And parents seem to be uncertain and reluctant about the role they should play in such matters, particularly in secondary schools. Yet, the stories of the participants suggest that parents have a very important role to play throughout the schooling experience.

Youth and High School

The youth involved in this study found the transition to high school to be unsettling. Their concern about personal safety in high school, both physical and emotional, was evident. The participants sought out friendships in this unfamiliar and uncertain high school environment as they attempted to develop connections, a sense of belonging and membership with the school.

Instruction in the classrooms I attended at Gilford tended to be linear. All students were to learn at the same pace and in the same manner. It should come as no surprise, however, that a secondary school is described in this manner. Cuban (1984), Goodlad (1984) and Holt (1964) are among those who have noted that teaching and learning in secondary schools have not changed much since the inception

of public schooling.

Student-initiated activities, rather than lessons presented by the teachers, gained and maintained the attention of many students in the classes I attended. Developing positive relationships with peers, or striving for social success, appeared to be a major enterprise for these students.

As individuals are primarily social beings, Adler surmised, the requirement of belonging is a fundamental need of human nature (Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1979, p. 15). For those students who have not had much experience with academic success, and who have not had much involvement in their own schooling, being accepted by peers and developing friendships at school, being perceived as "cool", or, at least, not being viewed as a "nerd" by peers seems to be of critical importance. It may be so because these children have never been successful in belonging through success with academics. In fact, for them, academic excellence is often seen, not only as unnecessary, but as a "dangerous thing" that might even compromise their ability to fit in.

The high school diploma was regarded as a critical commodity in today's world. The participants indicated that they, their parents and their friends believed in the value of remaining in school to obtain the diploma. Yet, on numerous occasions, the participants arrived late for classes and they skipped classes. They tended to enrol in the lowest level offered in a course, complete the least

amount of homework and achieve the minimum mark that would constitute having completed the course, thus moving one step closer to the diploma.

The actions of these students may be indicative of a rejection of the program of studies offered to them. This conduct may also indicate a reaction to the approach to instruction and learning encountered and what was promoted as indicators of success. It may reflect a lack of understanding of what is required to achieve their dreams for the future, or it may reflect a lack of vision of the future. It may demonstrate an unwillingness to put aside immediate wants for long term benefits. It may also indicate an unwillingness or an inability to take personal control of their lives or, alternatively, an orientation towards taking control through a lifestyle of avoidance.

For these three students, one cannot isolate one set of factors as having caused their in-school behaviours. It appears that a variety of factors in the home and at school and aspects of their personal and social lives, influenced, in individual ways, each of them in their decisions about school.

Recommendations for Practice

Three cases provide very limited data from which to draw recommendations for practice. However, it is possible to make recommendations for practices that might have reduced the risk of school leaving for Amanda, Carl and Karen. Readers will have to decide whether the

recommendations are useful in the contexts in which they work.

Numerous recommendations for practice can be found in studies cited previously in this document. And many of these recommendations are supported by the findings of this study. For example, it does appear that encountering caring teachers, smaller schools and being involved in the school reduces the risk of early school leaving.

However, the school is only one of the environments influencing the lives of youth. Concentrating on school factors fails to consider the student's "ecological systems" (Lerner, 1986) that include the environments of the school, the home, the social and cultural groups. It is important to consider, Lerner (1986) noted, the complex interrelationships that exist between the student and each of these environments (p. 104).

Attempts to understand early school leavers through a reductionist approach, that is, isolating single factors that cause youth to be at risk, fails to come to terms with the complexity of the relationship between youth and these environments. Such an approach fails to provide a complete picture of the process that results in some students leaving school and, for others, remaining in school. As a result it can lead only to incomplete answers for practitioners.

For example, it would seem reasonable to assume there was a correlation between the limited homework completed by Karen and Carl and the after-school jobs they both held.

Accordingly, it would appear that the amount of homework completed by these two students could be increased by reducing their hours of after-school employment. Such a solution, though, fails to consider other reasons they gave for not doing homework. It seems likely that if this was the only aspect of their lives that was altered, there would be little change in the amount of homework done.

Programs and services designed to prevent early school leaving by conceptualizing the problem from an "ecosystem perspective" will have a better chance of succeeding as they are more capable of responding to the complex and interactive nature of early school leaving (Dupper, 1993). Such a perspective considers not only the complex interrelationship between youth and school, but also the multifarious and interactive relationship youth have with the home, and the social and cultural communities in which they exist.

The stories of the participants of this study illustrated that, for each of them, elements of their "ecosystems" did interact in ways that, over a long period of time, influenced their success in school. The stories of the participants also suggested that this is a cumulative process. Each of the participants, especially Amanda, began to experience difficulties in school in the elementary grades. Prevention programs, Dupper (1993) noted, "have a better chance of succeeding if potential dropouts are identified early in their school careers rather than after

their problems become entrenched, as is currently done" (Dupper, 1993, p. 147).

An examination of the psychological make-up of at risk students was outside the purposes of this study. However, it is evident that psychological perspectives are important to an understanding of the experiences of these students. For example, although no assessments were performed to ascertain how the participants conceptualized control over their lives, there was ample evidence from the stories that, to varying degrees, each student exhibited an "external locus of control." The participants indicated that many of their current difficulties in school were the result of things that transpired in elementary school or the result of the teachers they currently encountered.

Individuals possessing an "external locus of control" feel that they had minimal control over the things in their environments and had a personal sense of inconsequentiality; "things happen to them; rewards are just given to them, as are punishments; and there is little they feel they can do about controlling these reinforcements." Such persons, Sampson (1971) wrote, would see themselves "living in a world of fate where little you did mattered much, so why do much?" (Sampson, 1971, pp. 324-325).

Payne and Payne (1989) indicated that at-risk youth do tend to have a more externally-based locus of control, "attributing their success or failure in school to luck rather than to their own effort (cited in Bowers, 1990).

Strategies to keep youth in school must provide opportunities for youth like Amanda, Karen and Carl to strengthen their internal locus of control. These youth must be able to learn to develop an enhanced sense of control over their own lives and become more "resilient" (McMillan & Reed, 1994) to hardships and the presence of at risk factors. This will prove to be a challenging task for any school. And it is a task that will have to be addressed by individual educators with individual students. To seek a solution that could be generalized is probably folly.

Suggestions for Further Research

Emerging from this study are several areas in which there exist opportunities for further research. Parents are an important influence on the lives of these youth. Yet there is uncertainty about the particular roles parents should play in a teenager's schooling. A better understanding of how parents perceive these roles and what they understand to be the various constraints and encouragements in this regard seem important.

One of the primary questions of this study asked participants to discuss their future plans for schooling. This question resulted in various discussions relating to future aspirations. The responses illustrated the limited range of career choices and other future aspirations, at least for the youth involved in this study.

This study and previous research on high school students (Downie, 1991) noted that some youth tend to have

limited opportunities to encounter and interact with a range of professionals and persons involved in a variety of careers. Research aimed at examining decisions about career choices could contribute to our understanding of how such future goals and aspirations are decided and the occupational limitations that, on occasion, seem to be perpetuated. Such research may also suggest more effective career planning strategies for youth.

As a result of this research and further activities relating to at risk youth, it has become apparent that one of the effects of increased public attention and public scrutiny on student retention has been for educational institutions to find ways to retain students. While this is laudable, it appears that public pressure has, at least occasionally, resulted in the development of strategies prior to understanding the issues those strategies are meant to address. Researchers can contribute to our understanding by conducting careful analysis of each of the issues.

Policy makers must come to a common understanding of the terminology used to describe students who leave school and they must determine who does and who does not fit within this description. It is imperative that, in seeking information about why youth disengage from school, a research methodology that is sensitive to the diversity of these youth and the complexities of their responses be utilized. Finally, programs developed and implemented to retain students need to be evaluated to determine what is

working and what is not.

Students at risk of leaving school prior to graduation present a key issue for schools and society today. While there has been a great deal of research conducted in this area, there are still many unanswered questions. One way to fill in some of the gaps in the current research is to conduct more "real time" studies. It may be that classroom teachers are best situated to conduct such studies.

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